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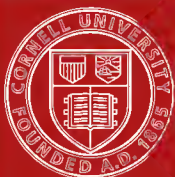
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THE TIME SPIRIT



Three pairs of eyes met in challenge

THE TIME SPIRIT

A Romantic Tale

BY

J. C. SNAITH

AUTHOR OF "THE COMING," "THE SAILOR," ETC.



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THE TIME SPIRIT

CHAPTER I

THE ARRIVAL

I

THE fog of November in its descent upon Laxton, one of London's busiest suburbs, had effaced the whole of Beaconsfield Villas, including the Number Five on the fanlight over the door of the last house but two in the row. To a tall girl in black on her way from the station this was a serious matter. She was familiar with the lie of the land in the light of day and in darkness less than Cimmerian, but this evening she had to ask a policeman, a grocer's boy, and a person of no defined status, before a kid-gloved hand met the knocker of her destination.

It was the year 1890. Those days are very distant now. Victoria the Good was on the throne of Britain. W.G. went in first for Gloucestershire; Lohmann and Lockwood bowled for Surrey. The hansom was still the gondola of London. The Tube was not, and eke the motor-bus. The *Daily Mail* had not yet invented Lord Northcliffe. Orville Wright had not made good. William Hohenzollern used to come over to see his grandmother.

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Indeed, on this almost incredibly distant evening in the world's history, his grandmother in three colors and a widow's cap, with a blue ribbon across her bosom, surmounted the sitting-room chimney-piece of Number Five, Beaconsfield Villas. And at the other end of the room, over the dresser, was an old gentleman with a beard, by common consent the wisest man in the realm, who talked about "splendid isolation," and gave Heligoland to deep, strong, patient Germany in exchange for a tiny strip of Africa.

Yes, there were giants in those days. And no doubt there are giants in these. But it is not until little Miss Clio trips in with her scroll that we shall know for certain, shall we?

At the first crisp tap the door of Number Five was flung open.

"Harriet, so here you are!"

There was welcome in the eyes as well as in the voice of the eager, personable creature who greeted the visitor. There was welcome also in the gush of mingled gas and firelight from a cosy within.

"How are you, Eliza?"

The tall girl asked the question, shut the door, and kissed her sister, all in one breath, so that only a minute quantity of a London "partickler" was able to follow her into the room.

The hostess pressed Harriet into a chair, as near the bright fire as she could be persuaded to sit.

"What a night! I was half afraid you wouldn't face it."

"I always try to keep a promise." The quiet, firm

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voice had a gravity and a depth which made it sound years older than that of the elder sister.

"I know you do—and that's a lot to say of anyone. How's your health, my dear? It's very good to see you after all these months."

Chattering all the time with the artlessness of a nature wholly different from that of her visitor, Eliza Kelly took the kettle from the hob and made the tea.

Beyond a superficial general likeness there was nothing to suggest the near relationship of these two. The air and manner which invested the well-made coat and skirt, the lady-like muff and stole, with a dignity rather austere, were not to be found in the unpretentious front parlor opening on to the street, or in its brisk, voluble, easy-going mistress.

"Harriet, you are really all right again?" Eliza impulsively poured out the tea before it had time to brew, thereby putting herself to the trouble of returning it to the pot.

"Oh, yes." Harriet removed her gloves elegantly. She was quite a striking-looking creature of nine-and-twenty. In spite of a recent illness, she had an air of strength and virility. The face and brow had been cast in a mold of serious beauty, the eyes, a clear deep gray, were strongholds of good sense. Even without the aid of a considered, rather formidable manner, this young woman would have exacted respect anywhere.

"Take a muffin while it's warm."

Harriet did so.

"I had no idea your illness was going to be so bad."

The younger woman would not own that her illness

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had been anything of the kind; she was even inclined to make light of it.

"Why, you've been away weeks and weeks. And Aunt Annie says you've had to have an operation."

"Only a slight one." The tone was casual. "Nothing to speak of."

"Nothing to speak of! Aunt Annie says you have been at Brighton I don't know how long."

"Well, you know," said Harriet in a discreet, rather charming voice, "they thought I was run down and that I ought to have a good rest. You see, the long illness of her Grace was very trying for those who had to look after her."

"I suppose so. Although her Grace has been dead nearly two years. Anyhow, I hope the Family paid your expenses." The elder sister and prudent housewife looked at Harriet keenly.

"Everything, even my railway fare." A fine note came into the voice of Harriet Sanderson.

"Lucky you to be in such service," said Eliza in a tone of envy.

Slowly the color deepened in Harriet's cheek.

"By the way, what are you doing at Buntisford? Does it mean you've left Bridport House for good?"

"It does, I suppose."

"But I thought Buntisford had been closed for years?"

"His Grace had it opened again, so that he can go down there when he wants to be quiet. He was always fond of it. There's a bit of rough shooting and a river, and it's within thirty miles of London; he finds it very convenient. Of course, it's quite small and easy to manage."

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"What is your position there?"

"I'm housekeeper," said Harriet. "That is to say, I manage everything."

The elder sister looked at her with incredulity, in which a little awe was mingled. "Housekeeper—to the Duke of Bridport—and you not yet thirty, Hattie. Gracious, goodness, what next!"

The visitor smiled at this simplicity. "It's hardly so grand as it sounds. The house doesn't need much in the way of servants; the Family never go there. His Grace comes down now and again for a week-end when he wants to be alone. Just himself—there's never anyone else."

"But housekeeper!" Eliza was still incredulous. "At twenty-nine! I call it wonderful."

"Is it so remarkable?" Harriet's calmness seemed a little uncanny.

"The dad would have thought so, had he lived to see it. He always thought the world of the Family."

The younger sister smiled at this artlessness.

"Every reason to do so, no doubt," she said with a brightening eye and a rush of warmth to her voice. "I am sure there couldn't be better people in this world than the Dinnefords."

"That was the father's opinion, anyway. He always said they knew how to treat those who served them."

"Not a doubt of that," said Harriet. "They have been more than good to me." The color flowed over her face. "And his Grace often speaks of the father. He says he was his right hand at Ardnaleuchan, and that he saved him many a pound in a twelvemonth."

"I expect he did," said Eliza, her own eyes kindling.

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"He simply worshiped the Family. Mother used to declare that he would have sold his soul for the Dinnefords."

"He was a very good man," said Harriet simply.

"It would have been a proud day for him, Hattie, had he lived to see you where you are now. And not yet thirty—with all your life before you."

But the words of the elder sister brought a look of constraint to the face of Harriet. Mistaking the cause, Eliza was puzzled. "And it won't be my opinion only," she said. "Aunt Annie I'm sure will think as I do. She'll say you've had a wonderful piece of luck."

"But the position *does* mean great responsibility"—there was a sudden change in Harriet's tone.

Eliza kept her eyes on the face of the younger woman, that fine Scots face, so full of resolution and character. "Whatever it may be, Hattie, I'm thinking you'll just about be able to manage it."

"I mean to try." Harriet spoke very slowly and softly. "I mean to show myself worthy of his Grace's confidence."

The elder sister smiled an involuntary admiration; there was such a calm force about the girl. "And, of course, it means that you are made for life."

But in the eyes of Harriet was a fleck of anxiety. "Ah! you don't know. It's a big position—an awfully big position."

Eliza agreed.

"There are times when it almost frightens me." Harriet spoke half to herself.

"Everything has to run like clockwork, of course,"

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said the sympathetic Eliza. "And it's bound to make the upper servants at Bridport House very jealous."

"It may." The deep tone had almost an edge of disdain. "Anyhow it doesn't matter. I don't go to Bridport House now."

"But you can't tell me, my dear, that they like to hear of her Grace's second maid holding the keys in the housekeeper's room."

The calm Harriet smiled. "But it's only Buntisford, after all. You speak as if it was Bridport House or Ardnaleuchan."

Eliza shook a knowledgeable head. "They won't like it all the same, Hattie. The dad wouldn't have, for one. He was all his life on the estate, but he was turned fifty before he rose to be factor at Ardnaleuchan."

"Well, Eliza"—there was a force, a decision in the words which made an end of criticism—"it's just a matter for the Duke. The place is not of my seeking. I was asked to take it—what else could I do?"

"Don't think I blame you. If it's the wish of his Grace there is no more to be said. Still, there's no denying you've a big responsibility."

At these words a shadow came into the resolute eyes.

Said the elder sister reassuringly, "You'll be equal to the position, never fear. That head of yours is a good one, Hattie. Even Aunt Annie admits that. By the way, have you seen her lately?"

"Seen—Aunt Annie?" said Harriet defensively. The sudden mention of that name produced an immediate change of tone in her distinguished niece.

"She's been asking about you. She wants very much to see you."

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The shadow deepened in Harriet's eyes. But an instant later she had skillfully covered an air of growing constraint by a conventional question.

"How's Joe, Eliza?"

"Pretty much as usual. He'll be off duty soon."

Joe Kelly was Eliza's husband, and a member of the Metropolitan police force. In the eyes of her family, Eliza Sanderson had married beneath her. But Joe, if a rough diamond, was a good fellow, and Eliza could afford not to be over-sensitive on the score of public opinion. Joe had no superficial graces, it was as much as he could do to write a line in his notebook, high rank in his calling was not prophesied by his best friends, but his wife knew she was well off. They had been married eight years, and if only Providence had blessed a harmonious union in a becoming manner, Eliza Kelly would not have found it in her heart to envy the greatest lady in the land. But Providence had not done so, the more was the pity.

"By the way,"—Eliza suddenly broke a silence—"there's a piece of news for you, Hattie. A friend is coming to see you at five."

"A friend—to see me!"

"To see you, my dear. In fact, I might say an admirer. Can't you guess who?"

"I certainly can't."

"Then I think you ought." Mischief had yielded to laughter of a rather quizzical kind.

"I didn't know that I had any admirers—in Laxton."

The touch of manner delicately suggested ducal circles.

"You can have a husband for the asking, our Harriet."

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The eternal feminine was now in command of the situation.

Harriet frowned.

"I can't think who it can be."

"No?" laughed the tormentress. "You are not going to tell me you have forgotten the young man you met the last time you were here?"

It seemed that the distinguished visitor had.

"I do call that hard lines," mocked Eliza. "You have really forgotten him?"

"I really have!"

"He has talked of you ever since. When was Miss Sanderson coming again? Could he be invited to meet her? He wanted to see her about something verra important."

A light dawned upon Harriet's perplexity.

"Surely you don't mean—you don't mean that red-headed young policeman——?"

"Dugald Maclean. Of course, I do. He has invited himself to meet you at five o'clock." Eliza sat back in her chair and laughed at the face of Harriet, but the face of Harriet showed it was hardly a laughing matter.

"Well!" she cried. Her eyes were smiling, yet they could not veil their look of deep annoyance.

"Now, Hattie," admonished the voice of maternal wisdom, "there's no need to take offense. Don't forget you are twenty-nine, Dugald Maclean is a smart young man, and Joe says he'll make his way in the world. Of course, you hold a very high position now, but if you don't want to find yourself on the shelf it's time you began to think very seriously about a husband."

"We will change the subject, if you don't mind."

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The tone revealed a wide gulf between the outlook of Eliza Kelly and that of a confidential retainer in the household of the Duke of Bridport.

"Very well, my dear. But don't bite. Have the last piece of muffin. And then I'll toast another for Constable Maclean."

II

The clock on the chimney-piece struck five. Before its last echo had died there came a loud knock on the front door.

Constable Maclean was a ruddy young Scotsman. He was tall, lean, large-boned, with prominent teeth and ears. Although freckled like a turkey's egg, he was not a bad-looking fellow. His boots, however, took up a lot of space in a small room, and the manner of his entrance suggested that the difficult operation known as "falling over oneself" was in the act of consummation. But there was an intense earnestness in his manner, and a personal force in his look, which gave a redeeming grace of character to a shy awkwardness, verging on the grotesque.

"Good afternune," said Constable Maclean, removing his helmet with a polite grimace.

One of the ladies shook hands, the other welcomed the young man with a cordial good-evening and bade him sit down. Constable Maclean, encumbered with a regulation overcoat, sat down rather like a performing bear.

At first conversation languished. Yet no welcome could have been more cordial than Eliza's. She felt like a mother to this young man. It was her nature to feel

like a mother to every young man. Moreover, Dugald Maclean, as he sat perspiring with nervousness on the edge of a chair much too small for him, seemed to need some large-hearted woman to feel like a mother towards him.

Miss Harriet Sanderson was to blame, no doubt, for the young policeman's aphasia. Her coolness and ease, with a half quizzical, half ironical look surmounting it, seemed to increase the bashfulness of Dugald Maclean whenever he ventured to look at her out of the tail of his eye.

It was clear that the young man was suffering acutely. Nature had intended him to be expansive—not in the Sassenach sense perhaps,—but given the time and the place and a right conjunction of the planets, Dugald Maclean had social gifts, at least they were so assessed at Carrickmachree in his native Caledonia. Moreover, he was rather proud of them. He was an ambitious and gifted young police officer. For many moons he had been looking forward to this romantic hour. Since a first chance meeting with the semi-divine Miss Sanderson he had been living in the hope of a second, yet now by the courtesy of Providence it was granted to him he might never have seen a woman before.

The lips of Constable Maclean were dry, his tongue clove to the roof of an amazingly capacious mouth. As for Miss Sanderson, mere silence began to achieve wonders in the way of gentle, smiling irony. But the hostess was more humane. For one thing she was married, and although Fate had been cruel, she had a sacred instinct which made her regard every young man as a boy of her own.

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Every moment the situation became more delicate, but Eliza's handling of it was superb. She brewed a fresh cup of tea for Constable Maclean, and then plied the toasting-fork to such purpose that the young man became so busy devouring muffins that for a time he forgot his shame. Eliza could toast and butter a muffin with anyone, Constable Maclean could eat a muffin with anyone—thus things began to go better. And when, without turning a hair, the young man entered upon his third muffin, Miss Sanderson dramatically unbent.

"Allow me to give you another cup of tea." The voice was melody.

A succession of guttural noises, which might be interpreted as "Thank ye kindly, miss," having come apparently from the boots of Constable Maclean, Miss Harriet Sanderson handed him a second cup of tea.

Still, the conversation did not prosper. But the perfect hostess, kneeling before the fire in order to toast muffin the fifth, had still her best card to play. It was the ace of trumps, in fact, and when she rose to spread butter over a sizzling, delicious, corrugated surface, she decided that the time had come to make use of it.

Perhaps the factor in the situation which moved her to this step was that only one muffin now remained for her husband when he came off duty half-an-hour hence, and that his young colleague of the X Division seemed ready to go on devouring them until the crack of doom.

"That reminds me," Eliza suddenly remarked as she cut the fifth muffin in half, "I promised Mrs. Norris I would go across after tea to have a look at her latest."

"You are not going out, Eliza, such a night as this?" said Harriet in a voice of consternation.

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"A promise is a promise, my dear, you know that. Mrs. Norris has just had her sixth—the sweetest little boy. Some people have all the luck."

"But the fog—you can't see a yard in front of you!"

"It's only just across the street, my dear."

III

As soon as Eliza, hatted and cloaked, had gone to see Mrs. Norris's latest, a change came over Constable Maclean. He was a young man of big ideas. But all that they had done for him so far was to turn life into a tragedy. By nature fiercely sensitive, the shyness which made his life a burden had a trick of crystallizing at the most inconvenient moments into a kind of dumb madness. A crisis of this kind was upon him now. Yet he had a will of iron. And in order to keep faith with the highest law of his being that will was always forcing him to do things, and say things, which people who did not happen to be Dugald Maclean could only regard as perfectly amazing.

His acquaintance with Miss Sanderson was very slight. They came from neighboring villages in their native Scotland; many times he had gazed from afar on his beautiful compatriot, but only once before could he really be said to have met her. That was months ago, in that very room, when he had been but a few days in London. Since then a very ambitious young man had thought about her a great deal. The force and charm of her personality had cast a spell upon him; this was a demonic woman if ever there was one; he had hardly guessed that such creatures existed. It would be wrong to say that he was in love with her; his passion was

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centered upon ideas and not upon people; yet Harriet Sanderson was already marked in the catalogue as the property of Dugald Maclean.

"Do you like *vairse*?" inquired the young man, with an abruptness which startled her.

The unexpected question was far from the present plane of her thoughts, but it was answered to the best of her ability.

"Yes, I like it very much," she said, tactfully.

"I'm gled." Constable Maclean unbuttoned his great coat.

Somewhere in the mind of Harriet lurked the romantic hope that this remarkable young man was about to produce a hare or a rabbit after the manner of a wonder-worker at the Egyptian Hall. But in this she was disappointed. He simply took forth from an inner pocket of his tunic several sheets of neatly-folded white foolscap, and handed them to Miss Sanderson without a word. He then folded his arms Napoleonically and watched the force of their impact upon her.

"You wish me to read *this*?" she asked, after a brief but sharp mingling of confusion and surprise.

The young man nodded.

With fingers that trembled a little, she unrolled the sheets of a fair, well-written copy of "Urban Love, a trilogy."

She read the poem line by line, ninety-six in all, with the face of a sphinx.

"What do ye think o' it, Miss Sanderrson?" There was a slight tremor in the voice of the author. The silence which had followed the reading of "Urban Love,

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a trilogy" had proved a little too much, even for that will of iron.

"It is very nice, if I may say so, very nice indeed," said Miss Sanderson cautiously.

"I'll be doin' better than that, I'm thinkin'." A certain rigidity came into the voice of the author of the poem. The word "nice," was almost an affront; it had come upon his ear like a false quantity upon that of a classical scholar.

"Did you really do it all by yourself?" The inquiry was due less to the performance, which Harriet was quite unable to judge, than to the author's almost terrible concentration of manner, which clearly implied that it would not do to take such an achievement for granted.

"Every worrd, Miss Sanderrson. Except——"

"Except what, Mr. Maclean?"

"Mr. Lonie, the Presbyterian Minister, helped me a bit wi' the scansion."

"If I may say so, I think it is remarkably clever."

It appeared, however, that these pages were only the opening stanzas of a poem which was meant to have many. They were still in the limbo of time, behind the high forehead of the author, but upon a day they would burst inevitably upon an astonished world. Would Miss Sanderson accept the dedication?

Miss Sanderson, blushing a little from acute surprise, said that nothing would give her greater pleasure. She was amazed, she wanted to laugh, but the intense, almost truculent earnestness of the young man had put an enchantment upon her.

But all this was simply a prelude to the great drama

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of the emotions which Constable Maclean had now to unfold. He had broken the ice with the charmer. The butterfly was pinned down with "Urban Love, a trilogy," through its breast. Miss Sanderson had never had time for reading, therefore she was in nowise literary. Thus, perhaps, it was less the merit of the work itself, which must be left to the judgment of scholars, than the force, the audacity, the driving-power of its author which seemed almost to deliver her captive into his hands.

She, it seemed, was its *onlie* true begetter. The poem was in her honor. Heroica, calm and fair, was the protagonist of "Urban Love, a trilogy," and she was Heroica. The position was none of her seeking, but it carried with it grave responsibilities.

In the first place it exposed her to an offer of marriage. "Urban Love, a trilogy," had broken so much of the ice that Dugald Maclean plunged horse, foot and artillery through the hole it had made. At the moment he could not lead Heroica to the altar; it would hardly be prudent for a young constable of eight months' standing to offer to do so, but he sincerely hoped that she would promise to wait for him.

Galled by the spur of ambition, Dugald Maclean took the whole plunge where smaller men would have been content merely to try the depth of the water.

Miss Sanderson was frozen with astonishment. It was true that "Urban Love, a trilogy," had half prepared her for a declaration in form, but she had not foreseen the swiftness of the onset. This was her first experience of the kind, but she was a woman of the world and she gathered her dignity about her like a garment.

"Ye're no offendit, Miss Sanderrson?" There was

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something titanic in the slow mustering of his forces to break an arid pause.

"I am not offended, Mr. Maclean." The tone of Miss Sanderson said she was offended a little. "But I do think——"

"What do ye think, Miss Sanderrson?" The naïveté of the young man provoked a sharp intake of breath.

"I think, Mr. Maclean"—the candor of Miss Sanderson was deliberate but not unkind—"if I were you, before I offered to marry anybody, I should try seriously to better myself."

The words, pregnant and uncompromising, were masked by a tone so deep and calm that a first-rate intellect was able to treat them on their merits. In spite of a flirtation with the Muses, this young man was a remarkable combination of wild audacity and extreme shrewdness. He had a power of mind which enabled him to distinguish the false from the true. Thus he saw at once, without resentment or pique, that the advice of Heroica was that of a friend.

She had a strong desire to box the ears of this rawboned young policeman for his impertinence; but at heart this was a real woman, and the dynamic forces of her sex were strong in her. It was hard to keep from laughing in the face of this young man in a hurry, who rushed his fences in a way that was simply grotesque; yet she could not help admiring the power within him, and she wished him well.

"It's gude advice, Miss Sanderrson." His tone of detachment drew a ripple from lips that laughed very seldom. "I'm thinkin' I'll tak' it. But ye'll bear the matter in mind?"

"I make no rash promises, Mr. Maclean."

"Well, if ye won't, ye won't. But I'm thinkin' I'd work the better at the Latin if I could count on ye."

"Studying Latin, are you, Mr. Maclean?" The surprise of Miss Sanderson was rather respectful.

"Mr. Lonie is learnin' me," said the young man, with a slight touch of vainglory. "And I'm thinkin' he'll verra soon be learnin' me the Greek."

"Are you going to college?"

"Maybe ay. Maybe no. You never can tell where a pairson may get to. Anyhow I'm learnin' to speak the language. Ae day I'll be as gude at the Saxon as you and your sister have become, Miss Sanderrson."

It was hard not to smile, yet she knew her countrymen too well to treat such a matter lightly.

"And I've a'ready set aboot writin' for the papers."

"Begun already to write for the papers, have you, Mr. Maclean?" This was not a young man to smile at. "Well, wherever you may get to," Miss Sanderson's tone was softer than any she had yet used, "I am sure I wish you well."

"Thank ye," said the young man dryly. "But why not gie a pairson a helping hand?"

"I am not sure that I like you well enough." Such candor was extorted by the seriousness with which she was now having to treat him. "You see, Mr. Maclean, it is all so sudden. We have only met once before."

"May I hope, Miss Sanderrson?"

Suddenly he moved his chair towards her and took her hand.

"Mr. Maclean, you may not." The hand was withdrawn firmly.

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"Well, think it owre, Miss Sanderrson."

The young man moved back his chair to its first position in order to restore the *status quo*.

Harriet shook her head. And then all at once, to the deep consternation of Constable Maclean, she broke into an anguish of laughter, which good manners, try as they might, were not able to control.

IV

In the midst of this unseemly behavior on the part of Miss Sanderson, the door next the street was flung open with violence. A figure Homeric of aspect emerged from the night.

It was that of Constable Joseph Kelly, of the Metropolitan Police; an ornament of the X Division, a splendid man to look at, nearly six feet high. Broad of girth, proportioned finely, his helmet crowned him like a hero of old. His face, richly tinted by daily and nightly exposure to the remarkable climate of London, was the color of a ripe apple, and there presided in it the almost god-like good-humor of the race to which he belonged.

This emblem of superb manhood was laden heavily. There was his long overcoat, a tremendous, swelling affair; there was his furled oilskin cape; at one side of his girdle was his truncheon-case, his lamp at the other side of it; in his left hand was a modest basket which had contained his dinner, and in his right was a larger wicker arrangement which might have contained anything.

"Is that our Harriet?" said Constable Kelly, in the act of closing the door deftly with his heel. "Good evening, gal. Pleased to see you."

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He set down the large basket on the floor in a rather gingerly manner, placed the small one on the table, came to Harriet, kissed her audibly, and then turned to the room's second occupant with an air of surprise.

"Hello, Scotchie! What are *you* doing here?"

Before Dugald Maclean could answer the question he was in the throes of a second attack of dumb madness. This malady made his life a burden. When only one person was by he seldom had difficulty in expressing himself, but any addition to the company was apt to plunge him into hopeless defeat.

"Up to no good, I expect." Joseph Kelly, disapproval in his eyes, answered his own question, since other answer there was none. "I never see such a feller. Been mashing you, Harriet, by the look of him."

It was a bow drawn at a venture by a shrewd colleague of the X Division. An immediate effusion of rose pink to the young man's freckled countenance was full of information for a close observer.

"Durn me if he hasn't!" Gargantuan laughter rose to the ceiling.

Harriet blushed. But the look in her face was not discomfiture merely. There was plain annoyance and a look of rather startled anxiety for which the circumstances could hardly account.

"Scotchie, you're a nonesuch." But Joe suddenly lowered his voice in answer to the alarm in the face of his sister-in-law. "You are the limit, my lad. Do you know what he did last week, Harriet? I'll tell you."

"Let me make you a cup of tea, Joe." And his sister-in-law, who seemed oddly agitated by his arrival, rose in the humane hope of diverting the attack.

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But the story was too good to remain untold.

"It'll take the X Division twenty years to live it down." Kelly throbbed and gurgled like a donkey-engine as he fixed his youthful colleague with a somber eye. "This young feller, what do you think he did last week?"

"The kettle will soon boil, Joe."

"Harriet!"—the rich rolling voice thrilled dramatically—"about midnight, last Monday week as ever was, this smart young officer saw an old party in an eyeglass and a topper and a bit o' fur round his overcoat, standin' on the curb at Piccadilly Circus. He strolls up, taps him on the shoulder, charges him with loitering with intent and runs him in."

"Here's your tea, Joe." The voice was sweetly polite.

"And who do you think the old party was, my gal? Only a Director of the Bank of England—that's all. The rest of the Force is guying us proper. They want to know when we are going to lock up the Governor."

"Joe, your tea!"

"We'll never get over it, gal, not in my time. Scotchie, you are too ambitious. There isn't scope for your abilities in the Metropolitan Force. Turn your attention to some other branch of the law. You ought to take chambers in the Temple, you ought, my lad."

But in answer to the look in the eyes of Harriet, her brother-in-law checked the laugh that rose again to his lips. There was a strange anxiety upon her face, an anxiety that was now in some way communicated to him. It was clear from the glances they exchanged and the silence that ensued, that both were much embarrassed by the presence of Maclean.

However, after the young man had entered upon a

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struggle for words with which to meet this persiflage and they had refused to come forth, he suddenly noticed that the hands of the clock showed a quarter to six and he rose determinedly.

"Yes, it's time you went on duty," said the sardonic Kelly with an air of relief.

Constable Maclean, feeling much was at stake, made a great effort to achieve a dignified exit. He was an odd combination of the thick-skinned and the hypersensitive. At this moment the shattering wit of his peer of the X Division made him wish he had never been born, but he was too dour a fighter to take it lying down.

"Gude-nicht, Miss Sanderrson." With one more grimace he offered a hand not indelicately.

"Good-night, Mr. Maclean." The tone of studied kindness was a salve for his wounds. The effrontery of this young man did not call for pity. And yet it was his to receive it from the sterling heart of a true woman.

The smile, the arch glance, the ready handshake did so much to restore Dugald Maclean in his own esteem, that he was able to retire with even a touch of swagger, which somehow, in spite of an awkwardness almost comically ursine, sat uncommonly well on such a dashing young policeman.

Indeed, the exit of Constable Maclean came very near the point of bravado. For as he passed the large wicker basket which Kelly had placed on the floor, the young man turned audaciously upon his tormentor. Said he with a grin of sheer defiance:

"What hae ye gotten i' the basket, Joe?"

"Never you mind. 'Op it."

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Less out of natural curiosity, which however was very great, than a desire to show all whom it might concern that he was again his own man, Dugald Maclean laid his hand on the lid of the basket.

"What hae ye gotten, Joe? Rabbutts?"

"If you must know, it's a young spannil." The answer came with rather truculent hesitation.

"A young spannil, eh? I'm thinkin' I'll hae a look."

"Be off about your duty, my lad." Joe began to look threatening.

"Juist a speir."

"'Op it, I tell you."

But in open defiance, Dugald Maclean had already begun to untie the string which held the lid of the basket in place. The majestic Kelly rose from his tea. Without further words he seized the young man firmly from behind by the collar of his coat. And then he hustled him as far as the door in a very efficient professional manner, straight into the arms of Eliza, who at that moment was in the act of entering it.

V

At the open door there was a brief scurry of laughter and protest which ended in a riot of confusion. And then happened an odd thing. But of the three persons struggling upon the threshold of Number Five only one was aware of it, and he had the wit to raise a great voice to its highest pitch in order to conceal a fact so remarkable.

"For heaven's sake hold your noise, Joe, else you'll frighten the neighbors," said Eliza, getting in it at last

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and indulging in suppressed shrieks at the manner of Dugald Maclean's putting out.

An instant later, the young policeman was in the street and the door of Number Five, Beaconsfield Villas, had closed upon him. But his singular exit was merely the prelude to an incident far more amazing.

In the uproar of Joe had been fell design. As soon as it ceased the reason for it grew apparent. An incredible sound was filling the room.

"Whatever's that!" Eliza almost shrieked in sheer wonderment.

Harriet's behavior was different. For a moment she was spellbound. The look in her eyes verged upon horror.

It seemed that a child was crying lustily.

"Wherever can it be!" cried the frantic Eliza.

A wild glance round the room told Eliza that there was only one place in which it could be. Her eyes fell at once on the large wicker basket, which had been set on the floor near the fire.

"Well, in all my born days!"

She rushed to the basket and began furiously to untie the lid. But the maxim "the more haste the less speed" was as true in 1890 as it is today. Eliza's fingers merely served to double and treble knot the string.

Uncannily calm, Harriet rose from the table, the bread knife in her hand. In silence she knelt by the hearth and cut the knot. The deliberation of her movements was in odd contrast to Eliza's frenzy.

The lid was off the basket in a trice. And the sight within further emphasized the diverse bearing of the two women. Harriet rose a statue; Eliza knelt in an



“How did you come by it, Joe?”

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ecstasy. One seemed to gloat over the sight that met her eyes; the other, with the gaze of Jocasta, stood turned to stone.

It was the sweetest little baby. In every detail immaculate, bright as a new pin, its long clothes were of a fine quality, and it was wrapped in a number of shawls. A hot-water bottle was under its tiny toes, and a bottle of milk by its side.

Eliza's first act was to take the creature out of its receptacle. And then began the business of soothing it. Near the fire was a large rocking-chair, made for motherhood, and here sat Eliza, the foundling upon her knee. Evidently it had a charming disposition. For in two shakes of a duck's tail it was taking its milk as if nothing had happened. Yet the calm, tense Harriet had a little to do with that. The milk was her happy thought. Moreover, she tested its quality and temperature with quite an air of experience. And the effect of the milk was magical.

As soon as sheer astonishment and the cares of motherhood would permit, a number of searching questions were put to Constable Kelly.

"How did you come by it, Joe?" was question the first.

Before committing himself in any way, Joe scratched a fair Saxon poll like a very wise policeman, indeed. It was as if he had said, "Joseph Kelly, my friend, anything you say now will be used in evidence against you."

At last, cocking at Harriet a cautious eye, he replied impressively, "I'll tell you." But it was not until Eliza

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had imperiously repeated the question that he came to the point of so doing.

So accustomed was Joseph Kelly to the giving of evidence that unconsciously he assumed the air of one upon his oath.

"I was *perceding*," said he, "about twenty-past four through Grosvenor Square, on my way to Victoria, when I see through the fog this bloomin' contraption on a doorstep."

"What was the number?" Eliza asked.

"I was so flabbergasted, I forgot to look."

"Well, really, Joe!"

"When I saw what was in the basket, I was so took, as you might say, that it was not until I was at the end of the street that I thought of looking for the number. And then it was too late to swear to the house."

"In Grosvenor Square?" said Harriet.

"I'm not *percisely* sure. The fog was so thick in Mayfair you could hardly see your hand before you. It may have been one of them cross streets going into Park Lane."

"A nice one you are, Joe." And Eliza began to croon softly to the babe in her arms.

Kelly stroked his head perplexedly.

"I am," he said, solemnly. "A proper guy I'll look when I take it to the Yard tomorrow and they ask me how I come by it."

"Take it to the where?" asked Eliza sharply.

"To Scotland Yard the first thing in the morning, to the Lost Property Department."

"There's going to be no Scotland Yard for this sweet lamb."

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"If I had done my duty it 'd ha' gone there tonight."

Said Eliza: "You haven't done it, Joe, so it's no use talking. And if I have a say in the matter, you are not going to do it now."

Here were the makings of a very pretty quarrel. But Eliza had one signal advantage. She knew her own mind, whereas Joe evidently did not know his. By his own admission he had already been guilty of a grave lapse of duty. And in Eliza's view that was a strong argument why the creature should stay where it was. It would be foolish for Joe to give himself away by taking it to Scotland Yard.

The argument was sound as far as it went, but when it came to the business of the Metropolitan Force, Joe was a man with a conscience. As he said, with a dour look at Harriet, two wrongs didn't make a right, and to suppress the truth by keeping the kid would not clear him.

But Eliza was adamant. Joe had made a fool of himself already. He had nothing to gain by landing himself deeper in the mire, whereas the heart of a mother had yearned a long eight years for the highest gift of Providence. The truth was that from the outset Joseph Kelly had precious little chance of doing his duty in the matter.

Perhaps he knew that. At any rate he did not argue his case as strongly as he might have done. And Eliza, rocking the babe on her knee, in the seventh heaven of bliss, rent Joe in pieces, laughed him to scorn. Harriet, standing by, a curious look on her face, well knew how to second her; yet the younger woman did not say a word.

In a very few minutes Joe had hauled down his flag.

Really he had not a chance. It was a very serious lapse from the path of duty, but what could he do, the simpleton!

"'Finding is keeping' with this bairn," said the triumphant Eliza.

It was then that the silent, anxious, hovering Harriet claimed a share of the spoils of victory.

"Eliza," she said, "if you are to be the sweet thing's mother, I must be its godmother."

"You shall be, my dear."

Harriet sealed the compact by a swift, stealthy kiss upon the cheek of the foundling, who now slept like a cherub on the knee of its new parent.

"The lamb!" whispered Eliza.

Tears of happiness came into the eyes of the mother-elect. Harriet turned suddenly away as if unable to bear the sight of them.

Said Joe to himself: "This is what I call a rum 'un." But even in the moment of his overthrow, he did not forget the philosophical outlook of that august body of men, whose trust he had betrayed. He turned to his long neglected cup of tea, now cold alas! and swallowed it at a gulp. He then went on with the solemn business of toasting bread and eating it.

To add to Joe's sense of defeat, the two women paid him no more attention now than if he had not been in the room at all.

"The sweetest thing!" whispered the one ecstatically.

"What shall we call it?" whispered the other.

"A boy or a girl?"

"Oh, a girl."

"How do you know?"

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"By its mouth. A boy could never have a mouth like that."

"I don't know that, my dear. I've seen boys with mouths——"

"But look at the dimples, my dear."

"I have seen boys with dimples——"

"——Joe Kelly, you are the durnedest fool alive." This emotioned statement was the grace to a very substantial slice of buttered toast. Joe ate steadily, but his countenance now bore a family likeness to that of a bear.

"Suppose we say Mary? It's the best name there is, I always think."

"But it may turn out a George, my dear. I hope it will."

"I feel sure it's a Mary," affirmed the godmother of the sleeping babe. "I wonder who are the parents?"

"Whoever's child it may be," said the mother-elect, "one thing is sure. They are people well up. I don't think I ever saw a child so cared for. And, my dear, look at the shape of that chin and the set of that ear. And that lovely hand—a perfect picture with its filbert nails. Look at the fall of those eyelids. No wonder it comes out of Grosvenor Square."

"Grosvenor Square I'll not swear to," came a further interpellation from the table.

"Get on with your tea, Joe," said the mother-elect. "What we are talking of is no concern of yours."

The miserable Joe took off his boots and put on a pair of carpet slippers.

"You've made a bad slip-up, my boy," he remarked, as he did so.

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The two women continued to croon over the wonder-child. Joe took a pipe, filled it with shag and lit it dubiously. This was a bad business. He was a great philosopher, as all policemen are, but whenever a grim eye strayed across the hearth, it was followed by a frown and a grunt of perplexity.

Joe smoked solemnly. The women prattled on. But quite suddenly, like a bolt from a clear sky, there came a very unwelcome intrusion. The street door was flung open and a young constable entered breathlessly.

Dugald Maclean was received with surprise, anger, and dismay. "Now then, my lad, what about it?" demanded Joe, with a snarl of suppressed fury.

"I'm seekin' 'Urban Love, a trilogy,'" proclaimed Dugald Maclean; and he spoke as if the fate of the empires hung upon his finding it.

"Seekin' what, you durned Scotchman?" said the alarmed and disgusted Joe.

With deadly composure, Harriet rose from the side of the sleeping babe.

"Mr. Maclean, it is there," she said, icily. And she pointed to the table where the precious manuscript reclined.

"Thank ye," said Dugald, coolly. And he proceeded to button into his tunic "Urban Love, a trilogy."

But the mischief was done. The alert eye of an ambitious police constable had traveled from the open basket at one side of the fire to the object at the other, sleeping gently now upon Eliza's knee. A slow grin crept over a freckled but vulpine countenance.

"Blame my cats," he muttered, "so there's the young spannil."

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Joe rose majestically. He said not a word, but again taking the intruder very firmly by the collar of his regulation overcoat, hustled him with quiet truculence through the open door into the street. Closing the door and turning the key, he then went back to his meditations, looking more than ever like a disgruntled bear.

CHAPTER II

AUNT ANNIE AND AUNTY HARRIET

I

AUNT ANNIE was the first to be told the great news. In the view of both nieces it was in the natural order of things that this august lady should take precedence of the rest of the world. She was so incontestably the family "personage," the eminence she occupied was such a dizzy one, that it would have been just as unthinkable not to grant her priority in a matter of such vital importance, as it would have been to deny it to Queen Victoria in an affair of State.

In point of fact, Aunt Annie, within her own orbit, was the counterpart and reflection of her Sovereign. In an outlook they were alike, they were alike in the range of their ideas, and well-informed people had said that they had tricks of speech and manner in common. This may have been a little in excess of the truth, one of those genial pleasantries it is the part of wisdom to accept in the spirit in which they are offered, but it would be wrong to deny that in the suburb of Laxton Aunt Annie took rank as a very great lady.

It is true that she lived in a small and modest house in an unpretentious street, but all the world knew that the flower of her years had been passed in abodes very

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different. And not only that, it was also known that every year on her birthday, the twenty-sixth of March, those whom it is hardly right to mention in these humble pages came to call on her. On the twenty-sixth of every March, sometime in the afternoon, a remarkable equipage would appear before the chaste precincts of "Bowley," Croxton Park Road. At that hour every self-respecting pair of eyes in the immediate neighborhood would be ambushed discreetly behind curtains in order to watch the descent of a real live princess with a neat parcel.

The contents of the parcel were said to vary from year to year. Now it would be a piece of choice needlework, fashioned by the accomplished hands of Royalty itself, which would take the shape of a cushion or a footstool, now a framed photograph of Prince Adolphus or Princess Geraldine in significant stages of their adolescence, now a chart of the august features of even more important members of the family. Many were the historical objects disposed about Aunt Annie's sitting-room, which the elect of the neighborhood had the privilege of seeing and handling when they came to call upon her. But when all was said, the undoubted gem of the collection was a superb edition, bound in full calf, of the Poems of A. L. O. E., with a certain signature upon the fly-leaf. This was always kept under glass.

It chanced that Aunt Annie had invited herself to tea at Number Five, Beaconsfield Villas, the day after the arrival of the babe. This was strictly in accord with rule and precedent. She was far too much a personage to be invited by her niece Eliza, but if she intimated by a letter, which was the last word in precision, that she proposed to call on a certain day, Eliza humbly and

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gratefully overhauled the best tea service and polished the lacquer tray which was only used on State occasions.

Not merely the mother-elect, but also godmother Harriet, saw the hand of a very special Providence in the impending visit of Aunt Annie to Beaconsfield Villas. It was only right and fit that the news should be first told to her. The matter must have her sanction. By comparison the rest of the world was of small account. The entire clan Sanderson lived in awe of her, and particularly her imprudent and *démodé* niece Eliza. The prestige of Aunt Annie was immense, and it did not make things easier for those who lived within the sphere of her influence that the old lady was fully alive to the fact.

Eliza confided to Harriet that she would breathe more freely when the morrow's visit had taken place. Harriet boldly said it didn't really matter what view Aunt Annie took of the affair. But Eliza knew better. In spite of the joys of vicarious motherhood, there could be no peace of mind for Eliza until the fateful day was over.

Half-past four in the afternoon was the hour mentioned in the official note. And it was then, punctual to the minute, that a vehicle of antique design even for that remote period of the world's history, in charge of a Jehu to match it, drew up on the cobblestones exactly opposite Number Five. The fog had cleared considerably since the previous evening, therefore three urchins, spellbound by the appearance of such a turnout in their own private thoroughfare, beheld the slow and stately emergence of a superbly Victorian bonnet of the most authentic design and a black mantle of impressive simplicity.

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Jehu, like the equipage itself, jobbed for the occasion, was the mirror of true courtliness. He had an uncle in the Royal stables, therefore he knew the deference due to the august Miss Sanderson. In promoting her descent from the chariot he did not actually take off his hat, but he stood with it off in spirit; a fact sufficiently clear to the three youthful onlookers, one of whom remarked in a voice of awe, "It's the mayoress."

Eliza, quaking over her best tea service on its elegant tray, knew without so much as a glance through the window that Aunt Annie had come. But she waited for the knock. And then apronless, in her best dress, with never a hair out of place, she opened the door with a certain slow stateliness. Before her *mésalliance* she had had great prospects as lady's maid.

"Good morning, dear Eliza."

It was four o'clock in the afternoon, but the distinguished visitor undoubtedly said, "Good morning, dear Eliza." Moreover, she offered a large and rigid cheek and Eliza pecked at it rather nervously.

The door of Number Five closed upon Jehu, upon his wonderful and fearful machine, and also upon the general public.

"And how is Joseph?"

"Nicely, thank you, Aunt Annie. I hope *you* are quite well."

"As well as my rheumatism will permit."

"Won't you take off your things?"

"Thank you, no, my dear."

Aunt Annie would rather have died than take off her things in that house. In her heart she had never been able to forgive Eliza her marriage. Joseph Kelly was

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a worthy fellow no doubt, a good husband, and a conscientious police officer, but by no exercise of the imagination could he ever occupy the plane of a Sanderson. It may have been mere pride of family but then pride of family is a queer thing.

Poor Eliza had fallen sadly from grace. She had come down in the world, whereas a true Sanderson always made a point of going up in it. Even if Eliza's relations as a whole were inclined to take a sympathetic view of her marriage, the one among them who really counted, was never quite able to overlook the fact in her dealings with her. Eliza had cause to feel nervous for Aunt Annie was never so impressive as when she entered the modest front parlor of Number Five.

It was easy for Aunt Annie to do that, because nature was on her side. With the honorable exception of her friend, Alderman Bradbury, the present mayor of the borough, she had more personality than anyone in Laxton. For forty years she had moved in the highest circles in the land. Moreover, she had moved in them modestly, discreetly, with the most punctilious good sense. She had known her place exactly, had kept it, therefore, with ever increasing honor and renown; but the spirit of imperious self-discipline which had entered into her in the process, sternly required that ordinary people in their dealings with her should know their place, too, and also be careful to keep it. In the domestic circle Aunt Annie was a pitiless autocrat, and in public life even the Mayor of Laxton and its leading Aldermen did not withhold their deference when she condescended to converse with them upon matters relating to the infant life of the borough.

No wonder Laxton's leading inhabitants kow-towed to Aunt Annie. No wonder niece Eliza cowered in spirit when she superbly entered that modest dwelling and sat in its most capacious chair. Tea was offered her, without sugar and with only a very little milk according to her stoical custom.

"Thankee, my dear."

The great lady removed a black kid glove, and coquetted with a delicate slice of bread and butter. If you have lived in palaces most of your days you know that simplicity in all things is the true art of life. Right at the back, as Eliza well knew, Aunt Annie was by no means so simple as she made a point of seeming. Her tastes and manners were modeled upon a sublime Original, but as the memoirs of the time have shown in the one case that things may not be always what they seem, the same held true in the other.

Eliza had never felt so nervous in her life. Even the historic hour in which she had first announced her engagement to Joe could hardly compare with this. But it was not until Aunt Annie had passed to her second piece of bread and butter that the thunderbolt fell.

"A cradle, my dear!"

It was quite true that a cradle was in the chimney corner, within three yards of Laxton's leading authority on the subject. Moreover, it was a cradle of the latest design, a cradle of the most elegant contour, it was a cradle provided with springs and lace curtains.

Eliza blushed hotly and murmured something about Harriet having had it sent that morning. And then all at once she became so confused that she began to pour

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out her own tea into the slop-basin instead of the cup provided for the purpose.

"Harriet who, my dear?"

There was only one Harriet, and Eliza knew that Aunt Annie knew that. It was a mere ruse to gain time—if such a word can be used without impropriety in such connection. Eliza sought to cover her confusion by a sedulous holding of the tongue, and by an attempt to pour out her tea as if she really knew what she was about.

"What is there in it?"

The demand was point-blank. It was almost passionate.

Without waiting to be told what there was in it, Aunt Annie rose, tea cup and all, and with the glower of a sibyl drew aside the curtains.

II

Mary was sleeping. Empirical science had proved her beyond a doubt to be a Mary. And she was sleeping as the best Marys do at the age of one month and a bittock, with her thumb in her mouth—if they are allowed to do so.

To say that Aunt Annie was taken aback would be like saying that Zeus was a little offended with certain events when he blew the planet Earth out of the firmament in the year 19—. However!—it was as much as Aunt Annie could do to believe the evidence of her eyes. She fronted her niece augustly.

"And you never told *me*, my dear."

"It didn't come till last evening," stammered Eliza.

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But a leading authority, even upon a subject so recondite, is not deceived in that way.

"The child is five weeks old if it's an hour," scornfully affirmed the expert. "Besides,"—the eye of the expert transfixed her niece piercingly—"do you suppose—a woman of my experience—needs to be told—but why pursue the subject!"

For the moment Eliza felt so guilty that she was quite unable to pursue the subject. Yet there was no reason why she should allow herself to be overwhelmed, except that Aunt Annie had an almost sublime power of putting people in the wrong. The situation in sheer grandeur and magnitude was altogether too much for her. And the mind of Aunt Annie, capable of volcanic energy when dealing with the subject it had made its own, had already traveled an alarming distance before Eliza could impose any check upon it.

"A very fine child—a very fine child indeed—but——!"

The portentous gravity of the words should have brought a chill to the soul of Eliza. But for some odd reason it caused her to laugh hysterically.

"It is not a laughing matter," said the face of Aunt Annie; her stern lips made no comment on the preposterous behavior of her niece.

"She's mine," gasped Eliza, when laughter had brought her to the verge of tears.

"Tell that to the Marines," said the face of Aunt Annie. In fact the face of Aunt Annie said more than that. It said, "Eliza, I should like to give you the soundest shaking you have ever had in your life."

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"Joe and I have adopted it," gurgled Eliza at last.

Aunt Annie drew herself up to her full, formidable, dragoon-like height of five feet ten inches, and gazed sublimely down from that Olympian elevation.

"Then why not say so, my dear, in so many words, without making yourself so profoundly ridiculous?"

III

With tingling ears, Eliza humbly admitted her fault. But as soon as she had done so, there arose a serious problem, for a simple creature in whose sight the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth was very precious. Aunt Annie began to ask questions—questions which forbade a person of ordinary discretion to answer with candor.

Whose was the child? What was its origin? What did the parents——? Why did the parents——? When did the parents——? Did Eliza fully realize the grave nature of the responsibility she was taking upon herself?

It was the last question of the series that Eliza answered first. And this she did for a sufficient reason: to answer the others was wholly beyond her power.

"We may be doing a very unwise thing," said Eliza. "Joe and I know that."

"I am sure I hope you do, my dear. But tell me, where did you get it?"

The voice of truth enjoined on a doorstep in Grosvenor Square, but the voice of prudence said otherwise. And the voice of prudence sounded a very clear and masterful note in Eliza's ear, for Joe, Harriet, and

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she were fully agreed that the true story must not be given to the world. Diplomacy was called for. Such a forthright creature was quite unversed in that dubious art, but she must prepare to use it now.

"I promised I wouldn't tell." Alas! that crude formula was all in the way of guile that poor flustered Eliza could muster at the moment.

Less by instinctive cleverness than by divine accident there was a world of meaning, however, in that faltering tone. And a word to the wise is sufficient. There was not a wiser woman in England than Aunt Annie, except—of course, that is to say!—speaking merely for the lieges of the realm—.

"Very well, I don't press the question." It was the tone she had once accidentally overheard a very great Personage use to Lord Gr-nv-llc.

Eliza sighed relief.

"But, let me say this," Aunt Annie looked steadily at her niece. "I ask no questions in regard to the parents, but whoever they may be, you must know that you run a risk. The offspring of a regular union are often unsatisfactory, the offspring of an irregular union, although I praise heaven I have had no personal experience of them, always bring sorrow to those with whom they have to do."

Eliza could only reply that the creature was such a dear lamb that she was quite prepared to take the risk. Aunt Annie shook a solemn head at her niece, and then surveyed the infant in true professional style. The babe still slept. Before the great critic and connoisseur made any comment she removed the thumb from the delightful

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mouth. And the act was done with such delicacy as not to bring a cloud to the dreams of this wonderful Mary.

This was a rosebud of a creature, and she lay in her grand cradle as if she simply defied even the highest criticism to dispute the fact. Certainly one who knew what babies were did not try to do so. Only one remark was offered at that moment, but to the initiated it was worth many volumes.

"Whoever's child it may be," said Aunt Annie, "and mind I don't go into that, it is not a child of common parents."

IV

For some odd reason, Eliza was so intensely flattered by Aunt Annie's words, that she felt a desire to hug her. None knew so well as Eliza that it was not a child of common parents, but it was not the way of this expert to say so. The wonderful creature was "wrapt in mystery," but the hallmark of quality must have been stamped very deep for such a one as Aunt Annie to commit herself to any such statement. Her standard was princes and princesses. Every babe in Christendom was judged thereby, and there was perhaps one in a million that could hope to survive the test.

A miracle had happened, but it was really too much to expect that the cradle would have a share in it. Aunt Annie shook her head over the cradle. It had too many fal-lals. She approved neither its curtains nor its air of grandeur. She was a believer in plainness and simplicity. If before incurring an unwarrantable expense, her niece had only mentioned the matter, the great lady

would have gone to Armit's personally and have arranged for a replica of the hygienic but unpretentious design supplied by that famous firm to the Nursery over which she had presided.

Eliza, however, could accept no responsibility for the cradle. Harriet had sent it that morning quite unexpectedly. Aunt Annie was a little surprised that the taste of Bridport House in cradles was not a little surer. Yet upon thinking the matter over she found she was less surprised than she thought she was. The Dinnefords were a good family, the Duke was esteemed, his late Duchess, for a brief period, had been Mistress of the Posset, but after all Bridport House was not Bowley. After all a Gulf was fixed.

It was vain for Eliza to show how disappointed Harriet would be; the cradle had so clearly cost a great deal of money. It had cost too much money, that was the head and front of the cradle's offending. There was an air of the parvenu about it. Such a cradle would never have been tolerated at Bowley, nay, it was open to doubt whether it would have been tolerated at Bridport House.

Annt Annie was still discoursing upon cradles out of a full mind, when Harriet herself came on the scene. She was spending a few days at Number Five Beaconsfield Villas before going down to Buntisford, and she had now returned from a day's shopping in London. She knew that Aunt Annie was coming to tea, yet in spite of being forewarned, the sight of the dominant old lady seated at the table seemed to dash her at once.

For one thing, perhaps they were not the greatest of friends. It may have been that Bowley set too high

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a value upon itself in the eyes of Bridport House, it may have been that Bridport House held itself too independent in the eyes of Bowley. The clan Sanderson, one and all, revered Aunt Annie; there was no gain-saying that her career had been immensely distinguished; but at this moment Harriet's greeting certainly seemed just a little perfunctory; it might even be said to have a covert antagonism.

Harriet's health was tenderly inquired after, she was solemnly congratulated on her recent appointment, which did her much credit and conferred honor upon her family; but it was soon apparent that there was only one subject, to which, at that moment, Harriet could give her mind. Had she been the mother of the babe, instead of the godmother merely, her impatience to draw aside the curtains of the cradle could hardly have been greater, or her delight in looking upon a ravishing spectacle when she had done so.

Even the stern criticism of those curtains she did not heed, until she had gazed her fill. It was a babe in a million. And when at last she was up against the curtains, so to speak, instead of meeting the curtains fairly and squarely, she began to paint extravagant pictures of the future.

Her name was Mary. That was settled. She was to be brought up most carefully; indeed, it was decided already that she was to have a first-rate education.

"A first-rate education!" There was a slight curl of a critical lip.

"Why not?" inquired godmother Harriet.

"The expense, my dear!"

"I think I shall be able to afford it."

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"*You*, my dear," said Aunt Annie, rather pointedly.

"I am the godmother," said Harriet, with the light of battle in her eyes.

"So I hear. But don't forget she is to be the child of a police constable."

"She is not the child of a police constable," said Harriet, with a mounting color.

"I don't know whose child she is. That is a question I prefer to avoid. But in my humble opinion it will be a grave mistake to educate her above the class to which it has pleased Providence to call her. No good can come of it."

"That's nonsense!" The fine voice had a slight tremble in it.

Aunt Annie looked down her large nose. "At any rate, that has always been my view. And it has always been the view of, I will not say who. It is very perilous to tamper with the order of Divine Providence. And I am surprised that one who has been called to a position of high responsibility should think otherwise."

The quick flush upon Harriet's cheek showed that the old lady had got home. She was always formidable at close quarters; even Harriet had to be wary in trying a fall with her.

"The child must have a good, sensible upbringing. Let her be taught cooking, sewing, plain needlework, and so on. And *I* shall be very glad to give a little advice from time to time. But I repeat it will be most unwise to set her up, no matter who her parents may be, above the station in life to which it has pleased Providence to call her."

Again the light of battle darkened the eyes of Harriet.

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"It is early days at present to talk about it," she said. And she laughed suddenly in a high-pitched key.

v

Water flowed under London Bridge. The flight of time demanded that Mary should fulfill her promise of being the most wonderful child ever seen. She did not fail, but grew in grace and beauty like a flower. At the date of her arrival her age was deemed to be one month. By the time it had been multiplied by twelve a personality had begun to emerge, twelve months later it was possible to gauge it.

There never was such a child. Eliza held that opinion from the first, and godmother Harriet shared it. Aunt Annie was more discreet, but her actions expressed an interest of the highest kind. From the moment she had committed herself to the memorable statement that "Whoever's child she may be, she is not a child of common parents," there was really no more to be said. But as the months passed and Mary became Mary yet more definitely, the old lady, to the astonishment of both her nieces, began to identify herself intimately with the fortunes of the creature.

The critical age of two was safely passed. And the age of three found Mary more than ever the cynosure of Number Five, Beaconsfield Villas. The infant had such health, her eyes were so blue, her laugh was so gay, her rose-bloom tints were so dazzling, that the childless hearth of the Kellys' was somehow touched with the hues of Paradise. In moments of gloom Joe had his doubts, and now and again expressed them.

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He had certainly done very wrong, the whole matter was most irregular, but the look in Eliza's face was a living contradiction to official pessimism.

In the meantime Aunt Annie sat many an hour, spectacles on nose, making "undies" for her new niece. The old lady was much courted by the rest of her family. Even amid the remoter outposts of the clan, her word was law. Apart from the romance of her career, she enjoyed a substantial pension, she owned house property, and the stocking in which she kept her savings was known to be a long one. But beyond all things was the woman herself. It was sheer weight of character that gave her such a special place among her peers.

The clan Sanderson was extensive, and inclined to exclude. There were Sandersons holding positions of trust in various parts of London and the country. There was Mr. George Sanderson, who was in a bank at Surbiton, who, if he did not actually share the apex with his cousin Annie, was immensely looked up to; there was Francis, who, from very small beginnings, had blossomed into a chartered accountant; there was young Lawrence, of the new generation, who had given up being a page boy in very good service, for the lures of journalism. He was far from being approved by his Aunt Annie, and he had not the sanction of his Uncle George, but he was understood to be doing very well, and if he only kept on long enough and made sufficiently good in this eccentric way of life, the mandarins of the family might regard him a little more hopefully. Finally, there was Harriet. Hers was a truly remarkable case.

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At the age of twenty-nine, without special training or any particular influence, she had been made house-keeper to the Duke of Bridport at Buntisford Hall, Essex. The more modern minds among the clan might affect to despise a success of that kind, but for generations there had been a sort of feudal connection between the great house of Dinneford and the honest race of yeomen who had served it. Chartered Accountant Francis might smile in a superior way, young Lawrence of Fleet Street, a perfect anarchist of a fellow, might scoff, but every true-blue Sanderson of the older generation was amazed at Harriet's achievement, and felt a personal pride in it.

Aunt Annie, who had a temperamental dislike of Harriet, was the first to admit that the rise of her niece had been very remarkable. The august Miss Sanderson was an unequaled judge of what Mr. George Sanderson called "general conditions." Her own historical career had given her peculiar facilities for gauging the lie of a country, socially speaking, her sense of values was absolutely correct, and she was constrained to admit, much as it hurt her to do so, that Harriet's success had no parallel in her experience.

Eliza Kelly occupied a very different place in the hierarchy. She was perilously near the base of the statue. Her brothers, her sisters, her uncles, her cousins, and her aunts, had always made a practice of going up in the world, but she had unmistakably come down in it. It was not that they had anything against Joe personally. He was sober, honest, a good husband, and he well knew the place allotted to him by an all-wise Providence. But when the best had been said for him

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he was not, and could never hope to be, a Sanderson.

It was, therefore, the more surprising that Aunt Annie should take so great an interest in the waif that the Kellys had adopted. None knew the name of its parents, none so much as ventured to hint at the source of its origin, yet the mandarin-in-chief accepted it as soon as she set eyes upon it, and month by month, year by year, to the increasing surprise of the clan as a whole, her regard for the creature waxed in ever growing proportions.

Mrs. Francis—A Miss Best, of Sheffield—had given an account of her afternoon call at Bowley, which she had timed as usual for the day after Royalty had paid its annual visit. Mrs. F.—in the family, she was always Mrs. F.—had then seen Mary for the first time. And although she had five of her own, the child had made a great impression. She was like a fairy, with vivid eyes and wonderful hair, which Aunt Annie used to brush over a stick every time she came to Croxton Park Road; her clothes were simple and in perfect taste, but of a style and quality far beyond the reach of Mrs. F.'s own progeny. She was then a little more than three, and not only Mrs. F., but *others*, according to Aunt Annie's account of the matter, had been greatly struck by her. She certainly made a picture with her dainty limbs, her laughing eyes, her flaxen curls. All the same, it was very absurd that the child should be turned out in that way. Eliza and Joe could not possibly afford it, and if the old lady was responsible, as was feared was the case, she ought to have had more sense than to set her up in that way.

As the result of inquiries, Mrs. F. felt bound to

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make in the matter, and there were very few matters in which Mrs. F. did not feel bound to make inquiries of one kind or another, it appeared that Aunt Annie was not responsible for her clothes. The clothes lay at the door of godmother Harriet. She had insisted on choosing them, and had further insisted on sharing the considerable expense they involved. Mrs. F. gathered that in the opinion of Aunt Annie and also in that of Eliza, godmother Harriet was inclined to abuse her position. She was always insisting. No detail of the creature's upbringing escaped her interference. She must have her say in everything; indeed, she came over from Buntisford regularly once a week for the purpose of having it. At Beaconsfield Villas, and also at Bowley, she took a very high tone, which Eliza and Aunt Annie strongly resented. But it seemed there was no remedy. Harriet was the godmother, she had her rights, her will was as imperious as Aunt Annie's own—and her purse seemed fathomless.

As soon as Mary was four, it was settled that she should go every morning to Bowley to be taught her letters. And she must be taken there by a girl "who spoke nicely." It seemed that a girl, who spoke nicely, was a rather rare bird in Laxton. At any rate Eliza having been compelled in the first place to yield to a nursemaid, had many to review before one was found whose style of delivery could satisfy the fastidious ear of Aunt Harriet.

Eliza might be piqued by such "officiousness," but she could not deny that Harriet had reason on her side. Perhaps it was overdoing things a bit for people in their position, but Eliza, if fallen from high estate, was still

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at heart a Sanderson. Therefore she knew what was what. And the secret was hers that the child's real home was a long way from Number Five Beaconsfield Villas, Laxton. Eliza could never quite forget the source of origin of her adopted daughter.

Every month that went by seemed to make it increasingly difficult to forget that. Princess Geraldine herself, that figure of legend who used to call at Bowley every twenty-sixth of March, could never have been in more devout or judicious hands than little Mistress Mary in that of the Council of Three, not to mention those of Miss Sarah Allcock, specially coöpted. No child so tended and cared for, whose welfare was so carefully studied by experts, could have failed to grow in beauty and grace. She was so perfectly charming and superb when in the charge of the discreet Miss Allcock, she took the air with her wonderful hair, her patrician features and her white socks, that the nearest neighbors began to resent it. It was considered rather swank on the part of the Kellys to set up such a child at all. They were surprised that Joe, a popular man, should not have a truer sense of the fitness of things. They were less surprised at Mrs. Joe, who was not quite so popular. But Joe was a sensible fellow, and he should have seen to it that the child did not become the talk of the neighborhood.

Yet, after all, it may not have been so much the fault of Joe or of Eliza, his wife, that the child became the talk of the neighborhood. In the purview of local society, whose salon was Mrs. Connor's, the green-grocer's lady, at the end of the street, the blame lay at the door of Miss Sarah Allcock. The truth was the

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incursion of Miss Allcock was keenly resented by the local ladies. She was altogether too fine—yet the odd thing was that she was not fine at all. But she was in every way uncommonly superior. No greater tribute could have been paid to the social supremacy of the presiding genius of Croxton Park Road, or to the strength of character of Auntie Harriet, than that such a one as Miss Allcock should condescend to Beaconsfield Villas. Truth to tell, Miss Allcock was a remote connection of the clan Sanderson, although never admitted as such by the mandarins. But she knew there were strings to pull, and a good place had been guaranteed her when she really started out in service.

All the same, as far as the neighbors were concerned, Miss Sarah Allcock was an error of judgment. She was amazingly neat and trim, she had the true Sanderson refinement of manner and address, she was fond of airing her voice to her charge with all sorts of subtle Mayfair inflections, and she looked *away* from the neighbors as if they were dirt. As if they were dirt—that was the gravamen of their complaint in the sympathetic ear of Mrs. Bridgit Connor.

Mrs. Bridgit Connor, the greengrocer's wife, was a widespread lady of Irish descent, of great but fluctuating charm, and unfailing volubility. Her vocabulary was immense, but scorn often taxed it. Her scorn of Miss Allcock taxed it to the breaking point. Born on a bog and descended in the remote past from the kings of the earth, Mrs. Connor had facilities of speech and gesture denied to the common run of her kind. She avenged the slights put by Miss Allcock upon herself and friends by alluding to that lady's charge in a loud voice when-

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ever opportunity offered as "a by-blow," or "a no-man's child."

When Mary was five there arose the grand question of her education proper. At first a great clash of wills was threatened. Aunt Annie had her views. Aunty Harriet had hers. Eliza, being merely "the mother," was not allowed to have any. Aunty Harriet thought perhaps the kindergarten. Aunt Annie did not believe in such new-fangled nonsense. Besides no kindergarten would take her.

"Why not?" asked Aunty Harriet. But as she spoke there came a slight flush to the proud face.

"Because they won't," said Aunt Annie with stern finality. "All schools of the better sort are very particular."

Aunty Harriet bit her lip sharply. She retorted, perhaps unwisely, that if they were not very particular they would cease to be schools of the better sort.

"Quite so," said Aunt Annie.

For the moment it looked as if daggers were going to be drawn. These two were always at the verge of conflict. Both were impatient of any kind of opposition, and in the matter of young Mistress Mary they seldom saw eye to eye. Aunt Annie did not disguise her opinion that Aunty Harriet was inclined to take too much upon herself, and Aunty Harriet had no difficulty in returning the compliment.

But Harriet had great common sense, and she was a woman of action. She was not the one tamely to accept the decree about schools of the better sort, but began to make researches of her own into the subject. She was very hard to please, both in regard to the

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style of the school and the condition of the scholars, and when at last one had been found which met the case, there arose the difficulties Aunt Annie had predicted. A child of parentage unknown, adopted by the family of a police constable, did not commend herself to the Misses Lippincott of Broadwood House Academy. To Aunt Harriet this seemed a great pity; the school presided over by those ladies was exactly suitable. Its tone was high but not pretentious; the small daughters and the smaller sons of Laxton's leading tradesmen mingled with those of its professional classes, and its reputation was so good that Aunt Harriet, after a discreet interview with the elder Miss Lippincott, a bishop's daughter and a university graduate, set her mind upon it.

Howbeit, the austere Miss Lippincott showed no inclination to receive the adopted child of a police constable as a pupil at Broadwood House Academy. This was not conveyed to Miss Harriet Sanderson in so many words, but in the course of the next day she received a letter, delicately-worded, to that effect. However, she did not give in, as smaller and weaker people might have done, but she put her pride in her pocket and, looking the facts in the face, went to take counsel at Bowley.

"What did I tell you, my dear!" said Aunt Annie. To refrain from that observation would have been superhuman. But the observation duly made, the old lady also revealed the divine gift of common sense. From all that she had heard the establishment of the Misses Lippincott was immensely desirable. Moreover, she clearly remembered the Bishop, their late father, coming to spend the week-end at the real Bowley, and hearing him preach a singularly moving sermon in the little

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parish church. Small wonder, then, that the tone of Broadwood House Academy was "exactly right" in every human particular; besides, Aunt Annie had met and approved Miss Priscilla Lippincott on two occasions. Therefore, the old lady promised Aunty Harriet that she herself would see what could be done in the matter.

The first thing Aunt Annie did was to induce the Mayoress, Mrs. Alderman Bradbury, to say a word on the child's behalf. She promptly followed up this piece of strategy by ordering her state chariot to drive Mistress Mary and herself to Broadwood House Academy.

The child was looking her best. Her carefully-brushed tresses shone like woven sunbeams, her slight, trim form was clothed with taste and elegance, her laughing eyes were frankly unabashed by the demure Miss Priscilla, nay, even by the august Miss Lippincott herself. The effect she made was entirely favorable. Besides, the Mayoress had taken the trouble to call the previous afternoon in order to speak for her, and Miss Sanderson, as the Misses Lippincott knew, was looked up to in Laxton; therefore, out of regard for all the circumstances, a point was waived and little Miss Kelly was reluctantly admitted to Broadwood House Academy.

VI

The Misses Lippincott never had cause to rue their temerity. Little Miss Kelly remained in their care until she was big Miss Kelly, a brilliant and dashing creature with a quite extraordinary length of black stocking. Neither Miss Lippincott nor Miss Priscilla ever regretted her democratic action. In fact, it was a source of jealous

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remark, even among the most distinguished scholars of Broadwood House Academy, that not one of them could wear the black beaver hat with the purple ribbon and its gold monogram B. H. A., or the blue ulster with gilt buttons, in quite the way that these modish emblems were worn by Mary Kelly.

It greatly annoyed Ethel Cliffe, who lived in The Park, and was a daughter of Sir Joseph, three times Mayor of Laxton, that in looks and popularity she had to yield to the offspring of very much humbler parents, who lived in quite an obscure part of the borough. But it had to be. Year by year the cuckoo that had entered the nest grew in beauty and favor, while the legitimate denizens of Broadwood House could only bite their lips and marvel. In the opinion of Ethel Cliffe and her peers, old Dame Nature must be a perfect idiot not to know her business a bit better.

It was not that Mary Kelly made enemies. Her disposition was open, free, and fearless; her heart was gold. Then, too, in most things, she was amazingly quick. She never made any bones about reading, writing, arithmetic, geography, and so on, she was good at freehand drawing, and the use of the globes, in Swedish drill and ball games, particularly at hockey, she was wonderful, and in music and dancing there was none in the school to compare with her. The only things in which she did not really excel were plain needlework and religious knowledge. These bored her to tears—except that she proudly reserved her tears for matters which seemed of more consequence.

As Mary Kelly's stockings got longer and longer the supremacy of Ethel Cliffe grew even less secure. Even

at Broadwood House Academy it was impossible to subsist entirely on your social eminence. Ethel had openly sneered at the outsider upon her first intrusion in the fold; the only daughter of a very recent knight found it hard to breathe the same air as the offspring of a humble police constable. But Dame Nature, in her ignorant way, bungled the whole thing so miserably, that while Ethel was always very near the bottom of the class, Mary was generally at the top of it; Ethel was heavy and humorless, and inclined to take refuge in her dignity, Mary was *bon enfant*, with very little in the way of dignity in which to take refuge. And in proof of that, a story was told of her, soon after she passed the age of ten, which ran like wildfire throughout Broadwood House Academy.

It seemed that in the vicinity of Mary's undistinguished home were certain rude boys. Foremost among them was Mrs. Connor's Michael, the youngest and not the least vocal of her numerous progeny. And it often happened that Michael was *en route* from his own seat of learning, where manners did not appear to be in the curriculum, when Mistress Mary was on the way home from Broadwood House Academy, where manners undoubtedly were. In the opinion of Michael's mother the Connors were quite as good as the Kellys—very much better if it came to that!—and this tradition had been freely imbibed by her youngest hope. The Connors were quite as good as the Kellys, Michael was always careful to inform his peers, but the haughty beauty of Beaconsfield Villas, in her beaver hat and blue ulster with gilt buttons did not share that view. She had simply not,

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so much as a look for Michael and his friends. This aloofness galled them bitterly.

Had she only known such aristocratic indifference was rather cruel. For Michael's one distinction among his mates, apart from his skill as a marble-player, which was very considerable, was that he lived in the same street as Miss Kelly. She was out and away the most wonderful creature ever seen in that part of Laxton. It was hard to forgive her for carrying her head in the way she did, yet it somehow added still greater piquancy to a personality that simply haunted the manly bosoms of the neighborhood. But her aloofness was felt to be such a reflection upon Michael himself, that at last that warrior was moved to a desperate course.

He took the extreme measure of offering Miss Kelly his best blood alley. But it was in vain; Miss Kelly would have none of his best blood alley, or of its owner. Michael then decided upon war.

In discussing the Kellys on the domestic hearth, he had heard his mother cast grave doubts upon the ancestry of their so-called daughter. Therefore, the spirt of revenge, rankling in Michael's tormented breast, urged him to adopt a certain rhyme, current at the time, for the chastening of this haughty charmer. Together with a few chosen braves he lay in ambush for her as she wended her proud way home from Broadwood House Academy. As soon as Mary Kelly hove in sight round the corner of Grove Street, S.E., these heroes burst into song:—

“I am Mary Plantagenet.
What would imagine it?
Eyes full of liquid fire,
Hair bright as jet.

No one knows my history
I am wrapt in mystery
I am the she-ro
Of a penny novelette."

On the occasion of the first performance, Miss Kelly did not deign to take the slightest notice. But after it had been repeated a number of times with increasing *réclame*, it grew more than she could brook. One never-to-be-forgotten Friday evening, in the fall of the year, she suddenly handed her satchel of books to her friend, Rose Pierce, and with decks cleared for action and the flame of battle in her eyes, bore down upon the foe. Michael Conner afterwards took his book oath to the effect that he was not a coward. But the beaver hat, the purple ribbon, the blue ulster and the gilt buttons put the fear of God into him very surely. He ran. Alas, he was a stocky youth, not exactly an Ormonde, even in his best paces, whereas Mary Plantagenet, black stockings and all, moved like a thoroughbred. She chased him remorselessly the whole length of Longmore Street, through the Quadrant, finally cornered him in a blind alley in which he had the bad judgment to seek refuge, and soundly boxed his ears.

As far as Mary Kelly was concerned the incident was closed from that moment. Michael Connor very wisely decided to close it also. He returned to his marble-playing a chastened boy. But Rose Pierce, the daughter of Laxton's leading physician, told the story breathlessly at Broadwood House Academy on the following morning. All agreed that the prestige of the school had been seriously impaired, but Miss Kelly was Mary Plantagenet from that time on.

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VII

By the time Mary was fourteen, Broadwood House Academy had taught her most of what it knew. Then arose the question of her future. The Kellys were people in humble circumstances, and it was felt that the child must be put in the way of getting a living. Eliza suggested a shop, Aunt Annie shorthand and typewriting, as she was so quick at her books, but Aunt Harriet vetoed them promptly. And as year by year that autocrat—promoted since the Duke's breakdown in health to the very important post of housekeeper at Bridport House, Mayfair—had supported the operations of a strong will with an active power of the purse, she carried the day as usual. Mary must be a hospital nurse.

To this scheme, however, there was one serious drawback. No hospital would admit her for training until she was twenty-one. The problem now was, what she should do in the meantime. In order to meet it the Misses Lippincott allowed her to stay on as a special pupil at Broadwood House. Paying no fees, she gave a hand with the younger children, and was able to continue the study of music, for which she showed a special aptitude.

For a time this plan answered very well. The Misses Lippincott had a great regard for Mary. In every way she was a credit to the school. Her natural gifts were of so high an order that these ladies felt that a career was open to her. There was nothing she might not achieve if she set her mind upon it, always excepting plain needlework and religious knowledge, and perhaps freehand drawing, in which she was a little disappointing also. Brimming with vitality and the joy of life and

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yet with her gay enthusiasm was now coming to be mingled a certain ambition.

As month by month she grew into a creature of charm and magnetism, she seemed to learn the power within herself. But that discovery brought the knowledge that she was a bird in a cage. The daily round began to pall. A rare spirit had perceived bars. Broadwood House Academy was dear to her, but she now craved a larger, a diviner air.

It chanced that she was to be put in the way of her desire. Once a week there came to the school a Miss Waddington, to give lessons in dancing. A pupil of the famous Madame Lemaire, of Park Street, Chelsea, this lady was an accomplished, as well as a very knowledgeable person. From the first she had been greatly attracted by Mary Kelly. An instructed eye saw at once that the girl had personality. Not only was it expressed in form and feature, it was in her outlook, her ideas. There was a rhythm in all that she did, a poetry in the smallest of her actions.

This girl was like no other. And Miss Waddington grew so much impressed that at last came the proud day, when by permission of the Misses Lippincott, Mary was taken to Park Street to the academy, in order that her gifts might be assessed by "Madame."

The opinion of that famous lady, promulgated in due course, caused a nine days' wonder at Broadwood House. Madame Lemaire, it seemed, had been so much smitten by the lithe charm of young Miss Kelly, that she offered to take her in at Park Street and train her free of charge for three years.

At once the girl grew wild to take her chance. It

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meant escape from a life that had already begun to cast long shadows. But her home people saw the thing in a very different light. In their opinion there was a wide gulf between the respectability of Broadwood House and the licentious freedom of Chelsea. Joe and Eliza were at one with Aunt Annie and Aunt Harriet in saying "No" to the proposal.

Mistress Mary, however, was now rising sixteen with a rapidly developing character of her own. Therefore she did not let the strength of opposition daunt her. She set her mind firmly upon Park Street and Madame Lemaire; and very soon, to the intense surprise and chagrin of "her relations," she had contrived to get the Misses Lippincott on her side.

Very luckily for Mary, those ladies were open-minded and worldly wise. They saw that the career of a highly-trained dancer had prospects far beyond those of a half-educated schoolmistress. Mary was rapidly becoming an asset of Broadwood House, but the ladies, although perhaps a little dubious, allowed themselves to be over-persuaded by Miss Waddington and the girl herself.

There followed a pretty to-do. Aunt Annie was horrified. Such a career, with all deference to the Misses Lippincott, hardly sounded respectable. As for Aunt Harriet, with her usual energy, she made first-hand inquiries in regard to Madame Lemaire. She found that the name of that lady stood high in her profession. But alas! one thing leads to another. Aunt Harriet, who had a shrewd knack of taking long views, had already espied the cloven hoof of the theater. It seemed inevitable that such a girl as Mary should drift towards it.

And of that sinister institution Aunty Harriet had a pious horror.

Therefore she opposed Park Street sternly. But the girl fully knew her own mind and meant from the first to have her way. And she played her cards so well that she got it somehow. No doubt it was judicious aid from an influential quarter that finally carried the day. Be that as it may, in spite of all sorts of gloomy prophecies, Mary was able to accept an offer which was to change completely the current of her life.

VIII

The move to Chelsea closed an epoch. At once Mary found herself in a new and fascinating world. Part of the arrangement with Madame Lemaire was that she should "live in" at Park Street, and have freedom to take a fourpenny 'bus on Sundays to Beaconsfield Villas. This was greatly to Mary's liking. Chelsea, as she soon discovered, had an air more rarefied than Laxton; somehow it had a magic which opened up new vistas. She had been by no means unhappy at Broadwood House, her foster-parents had treated her with every kindness, but she could not help feeling that by comparison with the new life, the old one was rather deadly.

Of course, it would have been black ingratitude to admit anything of the kind. Still, the fact was there. Park Street had a freedom, a gayety, a careless bonhomie far removed from the austerity of Broadwood House. Her life had been enlarged. The hours were long, the work was hard, but her heart was in it, and the novel charm of her surroundings was a perpetual delight.

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A month of Park Street brought more knowledge of the world than a lustrum of Broadwood House. Madame Lemaire's establishment was a famous one, in fact the resort of fashion; to the perceptive Mary the people with whom she had now to rub shoulders had real educational value.

The girl was one of a number of articulated pupils, who were taught dancing in order to teach it again. With all of these she got on well. Immensely likeable herself, she had an instinct for liking others. And she was now among a rather picked lot, a little Bohemian perhaps in the general range of their ideas, but friendly, amusing, and at heart "good sorts." Madame knew her business thoroughly. She seldom erred as to the character and capacity of those whom she chose to help her in return for a valuable training.

Some of the girls who passed through her hands found their way on to the stage. Distinguished names were among them. Indeed, the atmosphere of Park Street was semi-theatrical. Dancing, elocution, singing, physical culture, and fencing were the subjects taught at Madame Lemaire's academy.

Mary remained nearly three years at Park Street. In that time she came on amazingly. Awake from the first to a knowledge of her gifts, she was secretly determined to use them in the carving out of a career. Broadwood House had sown the seed of ambition; under the able tutelage of Madame Lemaire it was to bear fruit. Stimulated by the outlook of her new friends, soon she began to feel the lure of a larger life. She craved for self-expression through the emotions, and all her energies were bent upon the satisfaction of a vital need.

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In the early stages she owed much to Madame Le-maire, who approved her ambition to the full. Here was a talent, and that lady did all in her power to fit a brilliant pupil for the field best suited to it. Unknown to Aunty Harriet, who still cherished the idea of a hospital at the age of twenty-one, unknown to Aunt Annie, who would have been horrified, unknown to Beaconsfield Villas, Mary with the future always before her, set to work under the ægis of Madame to make her dreams come true.

After many diligent months, in the course of which a singularly dainty pair of feet were reënforced by a very serviceable soprano, there came the day when she was given her chance. A theatrical manager, who made a point of attending the annual display of Madame's pupils at the Terpsichorean Hall, was so struck by her abilities that he offered her an engagement. It was true that it was merely to understudy in the provinces a small part in a musical comedy. But it was a beginning, if an humble one, and its acceptance was strongly advised. It meant the opening of the magic door at which so many are doomed to knock in vain. This girl should go far; but if the new life proved too hard, Madame would be more than willing for her to return to Park Street as a member of her staff.

Alarums and excursions followed. Before a decision could be made the girl felt in honor bound to consult godmother Harriet. So intensely had that lady the welfare of Mary at heart, that she never failed to visit Park Street once a week when in London. There was a very real bond of sympathy between them, which time had deepened. Yet hitherto Mary had not ventured

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to disclose the scope and nature of her plans. Alas! she had now to launch a bolt from the blue.

The blow fell one Wednesday afternoon when Aunt Harriet came as usual to drink a weekly cup of tea at Park Street with her adopted niece. Aunt Harriet, although she prided herself upon being a woman of the world, was unable to entertain such an idea for a moment. Years ago it had been decided that Mary was to be a hospital nurse. But Mary, now a strong-willed creature of eighteen had made her own decision. For many a month she had been working hard, unknown to her friends, in order to seize the chance when it came. Moreover, she felt within herself that she had found her true vocation.

Aunt Harriet took a high tone. Three years before she had met defeat at the hands of this headstrong young woman in alliance with the Misses Lippincott. In secret, and for a reason only known to herself, she had never ceased to deplore that fact. She made up her mind that she would not be overcome a second time. But she was quite unable to shake the girl's determination. And there was Madame Lemaire to reckon with. Indeed, that worldly-wise person seconded her clever pupil in the way the Broadwood House ladies had. Nor was it luck altogether that for a second time brought the girl such powerful backing when she needed it most. Behind the engaging air of simple frankness was a will that nothing could shake.

The end of the matter was that two powerful natures came perilously near the point of estrangement. Both had fully made up their minds. That memorable Wednesday afternoon saw a veritable passage of arms, in the

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course of which Mary, her back to the wall, at last threw down the gage of battle.

Her blunt refusal to submit to dictation came as a shock to Harriet, whose distress seemed out of all proportion to its cause. But to her the project was so demoralizing that she fought against it tooth and nail. She enlisted Aunt Annie, now very infirm and less active as a power, and the girl's home people at Beaconsfield Villas. But all opposition was vain. The young Amazon had cast the die for better or for worse. To Harriet's consternation she took the manager's offer. Disaster was predicted. There were heavy hearts in Laxton, but the heaviest of all was at Bridport House, Mayfair.

CHAPTER III

FLOWING WATER

I

ON a spring afternoon, Mary at ease, novel in lap, let her mind flow over the years in their passing. Four had gone by since she had defied her family, in order to embrace a career, which in their view was full of peril. But in spite of that, so far she had escaped disaster. And fortune had been amazingly kind in the meantime.

On the table near Mary's elbow were five cups on a tray, and opposite, also at ease, with her hands behind her shrewd head, was Milly Wren. Mary had just begun to share a very comfortable flat with Milly and Milly's mother.

Milly herself, in Mary's opinion, was more than worthy of her surroundings. Loyal, sympathetic, full of courage, she had served a far longer apprenticeship to success than Mary had. She had "made good" in the face of heavy odds.

Milly had not a great talent. Force of character and singleness of aim had brought her to the top, and only these, as she well knew, would keep her there. But with Mary it was a different story. All sorts of fairies had attended her birth. She had every gift for the career

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she had chosen, moreover, she had them in abundance. Milly, who had gone up the ladder a step at a time, would have been more than human had she not envied her friend the qualities she wore with the indifference of a regular royal queen.

The clock on the chimney-piece struck four.

"I'm feeling quite excited," Milly suddenly remarked.

From the depths of the opposite chair came the note which for six months now had cast a spell upon London.

"He mustn't know that," laughed Mary. "Dignity, my child, touched with hauteur, is the prescription for a marquis. At least that's according to the book of the words." And she gayly waved the novel she had neglected for nearly an hour.

"Oh, Sonny," said Milly Wren, "I wasn't thinking of *him*. I was thinking of the friend he is bringing, who is simply dying to know you."

Mary knew this was quite true, for that was Milly's way.

"Oh, is he!" If the tone was disdain, its sting was masked by gentle irony and humor. These airs and graces didn't make enemies, they so frankly belonged to the wonderful Mary Lawrence—her name in the theater. That which might have been mere petulance in a nature thinner of texture, became with her a half-royal impatience for the more trivial aspects of the human comedy.

"But I want to see him," persisted Milly. "Sonny thinks no end of him."

"Then I'm sure he's nice."

"Why do you think so?" Milly was a little intrigued by the warmth of the words.

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"Because Lord Wrexham is charming."

Milly laughed. The naïve admiration was unexpected, the slightly too respectful air was puzzling. Milly herself was so *blasé* in regard to the peerage that such an attitude of mind seemed almost provincial. Yet she would have been the first to own that it was the only thing about her enigmatic friend which suggested anything of the kind.

"Sonny says he raves about you."

"It's *his funeral*." The laugh was honestly gay. "He'll be very disappointed, poor lad."

"Don't fish."

"I never fish in shallow waters, Miss Wren."

"You are the most shameless angler I know. But you do it so beautifully that people don't realize what you are at."

"Unconsciously—say unconsciously," came a flash from the opposite chair.

"So I used to think. Before I really knew you I thought everything you said and did just happened so. But now I am not quite sure that you have not thought everything out beforehand."

"Don't make me out a horror."

"Anyway you are much the cleverest creature I have ever met. You are so deep that there is no fathoming you. Somehow you are not the least ordinary in anything."

Mary abruptly brought the conversation back to Sonny and his friend. The latter, it seemed, had first gazed on the famous Miss Lawrence in New York, at the Pumpnickel Theater, the previous year.

"An American?"

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"No," said Milly. "But he's seen a lot of life out West."

Before other questions could rise to Mary's lips, Mrs. Wren came in. Milly's mother was an elderly lady who had been on the stage. In the first flight of her profession, life had given her many a shrewd knock, but in the process she had picked up a considerable knowledge of the world and its ways. She lived for Milly, in whom her every thought was centered, for in the daughter the mother lived again. Intensely ambitious for her, Mrs. Wren was a little inclined to resent the intrusion within the nest of a bird of such dazzling plumage as Mary Lawrence. At the same time that honest woman well knew that her daughter had more to gain than she had to lose by sharing a roof with such a supremely attractive stable companion.

Mrs. Wren found it very difficult to place Mary Lawrence. In ideas and outlook, in the face she showed to the world, she was far from being a typical member of her calling as the good lady knew it. As Mrs. Wren reckoned success, this girl had won it on two continents almost too abundantly, but she seemed to hold it very cheap. Perhaps it had been gained too easily. Milly's mother, rather jealous, rather ambitious as she was, could hardly find it in her heart to say it was undeserved, but Mary Lawrence took the high gifts of fortune so much for granted, almost as if they were a birthright, that the mother of her friend, remembering the long years of her own thornily-crowned servitude, and Milly's hard struggle "to arrive," could not help a feeling of secret envy.

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"His lordship coming to tea?" said Mrs Wren, with a demure glance at the five cups on the tray.

None knew so well as she that his lordship was coming to tea. She had made elaborate preparations in toilette and confectionery in order to receive him. But the phrase rose so histrionically to her lips that she simply couldn't resist it. Somehow it made such a perfect entrance, for Milly's mother carried a sense of the theater into private life.

It would have been heartless of Milly, who belonged to another generation, to have uttered the words on her tongue. And those words were, "You know perfectly well that Sonny is coming."

"He said he was," Milly's reply was given with a patient smile that concealed an infinity of boredom. Her mother, fussy, trite, rather exasperating, had never quite learned amid all her jousts with the world, to acquire the golden mean. There were times when she sorely tried her clever and ambitious daughter, whose patience was little short of angelic.

"What's the name of the friend he is bringing?"

"Mr. Dinneford."

"Not another lord?" The tone of Mrs. Wren had a tiny note of disappointment.

"A rich commoner," said Milly with a laugh. "At least Sonny says he will be one of the richest men in England when his uncle dies. His uncle, I believe, is a great swell."

"I don't doubt it, dear," said Mrs. Wren.

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II

An electric bell was heard to buzz.

"They are here," said Mrs. Wren in a tone with a thrill in it.

A neat parlor maid announced "Lord Wrexham, Mr. Dinneford," and two stalwart young men entered cheerily. They were hearty upstanding fellows, curiously alike in manner, appearance, dress, yet in the thousand and one subtleties of character immutably different. But this was not a moment for the fine shades. They came into the room unaffectedly, without shyness, and warmly took the hands of welcome that were offered them.

Wrexham, a subaltern of the Pinks of three years' standing, was an attractive but rather irresolute young man. He knew that he was perilously near forbidden ground. If not exactly in the toils of an infatuation, the charms of Milly were growing day by day upon an impressionable mind. Fully content as yet to live in the moment, a wiser young man might have begun to pay the future some little attention.

As for the lively, headstrong, unconventional Jack Dinneford, at present at a loose end in London, to whom Wrexham himself had been appointed as a sort of unofficial bear-leader by the express desire of Bridport House, that warrior was on a voyage of discovery. In common with half the males of his age in the metropolis he was already in the thrall of the wonderful Princess Bedalia. In the opinion of connoisseurs she was the only one of her kind; for the past two hundred nights she had played "to capacity" at the Frivolity Theater,

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and even Jack Dinneford, who in one way or another had seen a goodish bit of the Old World and the New, could not repress an exquisite little thrill as her highness rose with rare politeness to receive him.

"She's even more stunning than I guessed," was the thought in Jack's mind at the moment of presentation. He could almost feel the magnetism in her finger tips. She was so alive in every nerve that it would have called for no great power of imagination to detect vibration all round her.

"I feel greatly honored in meeting you," said the young man with transparent honesty. He was no subscriber evidently to the maxim, "Language was given us to conceal our thoughts." Somehow she couldn't help liking him for it.

"The honor is mine." The response was so ready, the humor behind it so genuine, that they both laughed whole-heartedly and became friends on the spot. There was no nonsense about Princess Bedalia, and the same applied to the brown-faced clear-eyed owner of the fanciful scarf pin.

The neat parlor maid brought tea. Wrexham, after a little amiable chaffing of Mrs. Wren, whom he had met on at least six occasions, provided Milly with tea and a macaroon, took the like for himself, and sat beside her without a care in the wide world. She was forbidden fruit; thus to frail humanity in its present phase she conveyed an idea of Paradise. Such a view was quite absurd, allowing even for the fact that Milly was an engaging creature, with a good heart, a ready tongue, a rather special kind of prettiness, and a particularly shrewd head.

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Jack Dinneford on the opposite sofa had stronger warrant for his emotions. This girl whom he had first seen in New York before the news of a great inheritance had come to him, whom he had since viewed ten times from the stalls of the Frivolity Theater, was a personality. There was no doubt about that. And as he discovered at once their minds marched together. They saw men and events at the same angle. A phrase of either would draw forth an instant counterpart; in five minutes they had turned the whole universe into mockery, but without letting go of the fact that they were complete strangers colloquing for the first time.

Mrs. Wren withdrew presently on the pretext that she had letters to write. A very pleasant hour quickly sped. Each of these four people was in the mood to enjoy. Life in spite of its hazards, was no bad thing at the moment. Wrexham, a thorough gentleman, was an immensely likeable young man. And while he basked in present happiness a certain resolution began to take shape in his mind.

As for Jack Dinneford at the other side of the room, his thoughts followed a humbler course. But he was an elemental, a very dangerous fellow if once he began to play with ideas. At present he suffered from the drawback of being no more than the nephew of his uncle; therefore his sensations were not exactly those of Wrexham, who was a natural caster of the handkerchief. But in this fatal hour Jack was heavily smitten.

He had met few girls in his twenty-four years of existence. In his naïf way he confessed as much to Miss Lawrence. She was amused by the confession and led him to make others. This was easy because he liked

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talking about himself, that is to say, with such a girl as Mary Lawrence inciting him humorously to reveal the piquant details of a life not without its adventures, he would have had to be much less primitive than he was to have resisted the lure of the charmer.

She was unaffectedly interested. She differed from Mr. Dinneford inasmuch as she had met many young men. Therefore, her heart was not worn on her sleeve for daws to peck at. But he was a new type, and she confessed gayly to Milly as soon as he had gone, she found him very amusing.

III

So much happened in the crowded month that followed, that at London Bridge the Thames might be said to be in spate. The two young men were often at the theater, and now and again Mary and Milly, chaperoned by Mrs. Wren, would accept an invitation to supper at a restaurant. Then there were the happy hours these four people were able to snatch from their various duties, which they spent under the trees in the Park. These were golden days indeed, but—the shadow of the policeman could already be seen creeping up. The senior subaltern had been constrained one fine morning to take Wrexham so far into his confidence as to inform him with brutal precision, that if a man in the Household Cavalry marries an actress, he leaves the regiment.

The young man was intensely annoyed. Wisdom was not his long suit, and although an excellent fellow according to his lights, right at the back was the arro-

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gance of old marquise. His answer to the senior subaltern was to arrange a most agreeable up-river excursion for the following Sunday. On returning late in the evening to the flat, Milly was in rather a flutter.

Mary, who had been one of the merry party, was troubled. She had certain instincts which went very deep, and these warned her of breakers ahead. She had a great regard for Milly, and the more she knew of Wrexham the better she liked him. But she saw quite clearly that difficulties must arise if the thing went on, and that very powerful opposition would have to be faced in several quarters.

Moreover, she had now her own problem to meet; Jack had begun to force the pace. And Mary, who had a sort of sixth sense in these matters, had already felt this to be an inconvenience. From the first she had found him delightful. Day by day this feeling had grown. An original, with a strong will and a keen sense of humor, he differed from his friend Wrexham inasmuch that he knew his own mind. He returned from the river fully determined to marry Mary Lawrence.

Perhaps this heroic resolve may have been forced upon him by the knowledge of other Richmonds in the field. Mary was famous and admired. It savored of presumption for such a one as himself, in receipt of a modest two thousand a year from his kinsman, the Duke, to butt in where men far richer were content to walk delicately. But he was "next in" at Bridport House, he was heir to a great name, therefore, at the lowest estimate, he was a quite considerable *parti*. This fact must stand his excuse, although he was far too

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astute to make it one in the difficult game he was about to play.

Jack was not afflicted with subtlety in any form, he was not even a close observer, but he understood well enough that it was going to be a man's work to persuade Mary Lawrence to marry him. She had an immense independence, to which, of course, she was fully entitled, a wide field of choice, and under the delightfully amusing give-and-take which endeared her to Bohemia was a fastidious reserve which somehow hinted at other standards. Even allowing for a lover's partiality this girl was to cut to a pattern far more imposing than Milly Wren. Her qualities were positive, whereas Milly had prettiness merely, a warm heart, a factitious charm. However, as soon as this sportsman had made up his mind to tackle the stiffest fence that a Nimrod has to face, he decided at once that the hour had come to harden his heart and go at the post and rails in style.

The next evening, as he strolled with Mary under the trees, he may have been thinking in metaphor, when he let his eyes dwell on the riders in the Row.

"How jolly they look!" he said. And then at the instance of a concrete thought—"By Jove, an idea! Tomorrow morning, if I job a couple of gees, will you come for a ride?"

The response was a ready one. "I should love to, if you are not afraid to be seen with an absolute duffer."

"That's a bargain. But they may be screws, as there doesn't seem enough decent ones to go round at this time of the year."

"I know nothing about horses," was the laughing reply, "except just enough not to look a hired horse

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in the knees. And the worse my mount the better for me, at least it reduces my chance of biting the tan."

"I expect you are a good deal better than you admit."

She was woman enough to ask why he should think so.

"You have the look of a goer," he said, as his eye sought involuntarily the long slender line of a frame all suppleness, delicacy, and power.

"Wait till tomorrow. In the meantime I warn you that you're almost certain to be disgraced in the sight of the town."

"Let's risk it anyway," said the young man delightedly.

In a very few minutes, however, Mary seriously regretted a rash promise. They had only gone a few yards farther, Jack still inclined to exult at the pact into which he had lured her, when both were brought up short by a sudden clear "Hello!" from the other side of the rails.

Jack had been hailed by a couple of long, lean young women with mouse-colored hair, on a couple of long, lean mouse-colored horses. They were followed at a respectful distance by a very smart groom on a good-looking chestnut. The set of the close-fitting black habits and the absolute ease of the wearers denoted the expert horse-woman.

"Hello, Madge—hello, Blanche!" The casual greeting was punctuated by a wave, equally casual, of the young man's hand.

As the two riders went slowly by they let their eyes rest upon Mary. The look she received did not amount to a stare, but it had a cool impertinence which somehow roused her fighting instinct. Unconsciously she

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gave it back. On both sides was a frank curiosity discreetly veiled, but the honors, if honors there were in the matter, were with the occupants of the saddle. Somehow that seemed so clearly to have been the place for generations of these lean young women with their rigidity of line, their large noses, their cool appraising air of which they were wholly unconscious.

Who are *they*? was their reaction upon Mary Lawrence.

Who is *she*? was her reaction upon these horsewomen.

"A couple of my cousins." The young man carelessly answered a question that Mary was too proud to ask.

IV

Mary's riding had been confined to a few lessons shared with Milly at the Brompton School of Equitation, and Milly was urged to make a third on the morrow. Mrs. Wren felt it to be the due of the proprieties that she should do so, but Milly herself, apart from the fact that she was shy of appearing in the Row, was quite convinced that it would not be the act of "a sport" to overlook the ancient maxim, "Two are company, three a crowd." Therefore the invitation was declined. And this discreet action on the part of Milly gave Fate the opportunity for which it had seemed to be looking for some little time past.

It was about twenty minutes to eleven in the forenoon of a perfect first of June that Jack Dinneford rode up gayly to the flat in Broad Place, leading a horse very likely-looking, but warranted quiet. It was a

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fair presumption that the guarantee covered the fact of its disposition, since it had made the perilous journey from the jobmaster's, three doors out of Park Lane, and across the 'No Man's Land' yclept Hyde Park Corner, that terrible and trappy maze, without a suspicion of mental stress.

Jack's best hunting voice ascended to an open window of the second story. The complete horsewoman, in every detail immaculate, came on to the little balcony of Number 16, Victoria Mansions.

"What a gorgeous day!"

"A ripper!"

If excitement there was on the side of either, self-mastery concealed it. Yet an inconvenient pressure of emotion was shared by both just then. In spite of a liberal share of self-confidence and a will under strong control Mary could hardly refrain from the hope that she was not going to make a perfect fool of herself. As soon as she beheld the upstanding chestnut below with its slender legs and thin tail, she winged an involuntary prayer to Allah that there were no tricks in its repertory unbecoming a horse and a gentleman. As for Jack, the presence of all the horses in the world would not have excited him. It was not in him to be excited by things of that kind, that is to say, it was part of his religion not to be excited by them; all the same there was a genuine, nay, almost terrible thrill in his heart this morning.

In the course of a rather wakeful night he had made up his mind "to come to the 'osses" in sober verity. To the best of his present information the gods, in the

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absence of the unforeseen, would discuss the matter privately about twelve o'clock.

"Blanche and Marjorie will have something to look at," was the proud thought in the mind of the young man as the complete Diana, fit to greet Aurora and her courses, emerged from the Otis elevator and took the front of Broad Place with beauty.

"I wish these clothes were a little less smart, and not quite so new," was the first thought in the mind of Diana. "I am sure they are both of them 'Cats,'" was the thought which followed close upon its heels. Until that hour it had never been her lot to harbor such vain companions. This gay spirit to whom the fairies had been kind had always seemed to breathe a larger, a diviner air. Such self-consciousness shamed her; but after all *those two* with their old habits and their odd perfection were more to blame than she.

Truth to tell, in the last seventeen hours a subtle, rather horrid change had taken place in her. Up till six o'clock the previous evening she had always been nobly sure of herself, regally self-secure. Always when she had measured herself against others of her age and sex she had had a feeling of having been born to the purple. Somewhere, deep down, she had seemed to have illimitable reserves to draw upon when the creatures of her own orbit had forced her to a reluctant comparison. In all her dealings with her peers, she had felt that she had a great deal in hand. But Marjorie and Blanche, whoever Marjorie and Blanche might be, had seemed to alter all that with a glance of their ironical eyes.

Jack fixed her in the saddle of the tall horse and

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lengthened her stirrup with quite a professional air, while Milly and her mother watched the proceedings in a rather thrilled silence from the balcony of Number Sixteen. Their minds were dominated by a single thought, which, however, bore one aspect in the mind of Mrs. Wren, another in the mind of the faithful Milly.

"She is *set* on marrying him?"—Mrs. Wren.

"He is so nice, I hope he won't disappoint her?"—Milly the faithful.

The cavalcade started. As if no such people as Marjorie and Blanche existed in the world, Mary waved the yellow-gloved hand of an excited schoolgirl to the balcony of Victoria Mansions. Jack accompanied it with an upward glance and a gravely-lifted hat.

In the maelstrom of promiscuous vehicles which makes Knightsbridge a thoroughfare inimical to man, Jack took charge of the good-looking hireling. With solemn care he piloted the upstanding one and his rather anxious rider into the calm of Albert Gate.

"I hope you are comfortable," he found time to say; moreover, he found time to say it so nicely and sincerely, almost as if his only hope of happiness, here and hereafter, depended upon the answer, that the answer came promptly in the form of a gay "Yes," although had she been quite honest she would have said she had never felt less comfortable in her life. Her horse was such a mountain of a fellow, that she might have been perched on the top of a very old-fashioned velocipede. Then the saddle was very different from the one at the riding school. It had much less room and fewer *points d'appui* to offer. As soon as her knee tried to grip the pommel she knew that she must not hope to get friends with it.

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She had embarked on a very rash adventure. And if she didn't make a sorry exhibition of herself in the eyes of All London, including *those two*, she would have cause to thank her private stars, who, to give them their due, had certainly looked after her very well so far.

"It's very sporting of her," said Expert Knowledge to Jack Dinneford.

"I hope the gee won't play the fool," said Jack Dinneford to Expert Knowledge.

v

Hardly had they entered the Row, when Providence, of *malice prepense*, as it seemed, threw them right across the path of the enemy. Cousin Marjorie and Cousin Blanche, walking their horses slowly along by the rails, were within a very few yards. Moreover, they were coming towards them. Mary, aided by the sixth sense given to woman, was aware of a subtle intensity of gaze upon her, even before she could trace the source of its origin. She could feel it upon her—upon her and everything that was hers, from the crown of her rather too modish hat to the tip of her tall friend's fetlock.

"Good morning, Jack," said a clear, strong voice.

"Hello," the tone of Jack was amazingly casual—"here you are again."

There was a moment's maneuvering, in the course of which three pairs of feminine eyes met in challenge, and then Cousin Blanche and Cousin Marjorie, smart groom and all, passed on without offering a chance of coming to closer quarters. Their tactics had been calculated so nicely that it was impossible to say whether

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discourtesy was or was not intended. But there was a subtle air about these ironically self-confident young women which prevented Mary from giving them the benefit of the doubt.

For a moment she felt inclined to rage within. And then she bit her lip and laughed. A moment later a sudden peck of the tall horse told her that it would be wise for the present to give him an undivided mind. Soon, however, Cousin Marjorie and Cousin Blanche were forgotten in the delights and the perils of the discreet canter into which she found herself launched. It was a perfect morning for the Row. The play of the sun on the bright leaves, the power of its rays softened by a breeze from the east, the sense of rapid motion, the kaleidoscope of swiftly changing figures through which they passed, filled her with a zest of life, a feeling of high romance which left no room for smaller and meaner affairs. And the stride of the tall horse, as soon as she got used to it, was such a thing of delight in itself, that she even forgot the strange saddle and her general fears.

They rode for an enchanted hour. And somehow, in the course of it, the life forces became more insurgent. Somehow they deepened, expanded, grew more imperious. Jack was a real out-of-doors man, who believed that hunting, shooting, field sports, and fresh air were the highest good. His look of lordly health, mingled with a charmingly delicate protectiveness, appealed to her in a very special way. For some weeks she had known that she was beginning to like him perilously much. But it was not until she had returned rather tired and rather hot

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to Victoria Mansions, had had a delicious bath, and a very good luncheon indeed that she began at last to realize that she was fairly up against the acute problem of Jack Dinneford.

CHAPTER IV,

BRIDPORT HOUSE

I

IN the meantime Cousin Marjorie and Cousin Blanche enjoyed their ride very much. It was the one thing they really did enjoy in London.

They were two ordinary young women, yet even so late in the Old World's history as the year 1913, their own private cosmos could not quite make up its mind to regard them in that light. Cousin Marjorie and Cousin Blanche had surprisingly little to say for themselves. They were modest, unassuming girls, without views or ideas, very proper, very dull, absurdly conventional; in the eyes of some people as plain as the proverbial pikestaff, passably good-looking in the sight of others; in fact, a more commonplace pair of young women would have been hard to find anywhere, yet deep in the hearts of the Ladies Dinneford was the sure faith that the world at large did not subscribe to any such opinion.

It was not merely that they rode rather well. They passed other members of their sex in the Row that morning who rode quite as well as themselves. No, proficiency in the saddle, the one accomplishment they could boast, of which they were unaffectedly modest, was far from explaining the particular angle at which the

world chose to view them. Not that in any way they were fêted or acclaimed. As far as the vast majority of their fellow-creatures were concerned they were not people to look at twice. But here and there a glance of recognition or curiosity would greet them, winged by a smile, now of mere interest, now of an irony faintly perceptible.

Life had been very kind to Cousin Marjorie and Cousin Blanche, yet they did not look conspicuously happy. With both hands it had lavished upon them its material best, but the gifts of fortune were taken as a matter of mere personal right. Providence owed it to the order of things they stood for. Far from being grateful, they were a little bored by its attentions. Moreover, these young women had not learned to regard people to whom the fairies had been less kind with either insight or sympathy. Their judgments were objective, therefore they were a little hard, a little lacking in tolerance.

II

"The stage!" said Majorie with a straight-lipped smile, a rather famous part of her importance.

"You think so?" said Blanche sleepily. But she was not at all sleepy, else she would not have been able to handle the Tiger, a recent purchase, in the way she was doing at the moment.

"No mistaking it, my dear."

"Good-looking, though," lisped the somnolent Blanche, giving the Tiger a very shrewd kick with a roweled heel. "Reminds me of some one."

The Tiger, worried by a bit that he didn't like, and

greatly affronted by the heel of his new mistress, which he liked still less, then began to behave in a way which for some little time quite forbade any further discussion of the subject.

For the rest of the morning, however, it was never far from the minds of these ladies. Two or three times they caught sight in the distance of Jack and his charge. A striking-looking girl, but she didn't in the least know how to ride. And somehow from that fact Blanche and Marjorie seemed to draw spiritual consolation.

At twelve o'clock they left the Park. The policeman at the gate pulled himself together and regarded them respectfully. An elderly lady in a high-hung barouche of prehistoric design, drawn by a superb pair of horses and surmounted by a romantic-looking coachman and footman, called out to them in a remarkably strident voice as they passed her, "I am coming to luncheon."

"Bother!" said Marjorie to Blanche.

"Bother!" said Blanche to Marjorie.

They went along Park Lane, as far as Mount Street, turned up that bleak thoroughfare, took the second turning to the right, and finally entered the courtyard of the imposing residence known as Bridport House. Before its solemn portals they dismounted with the help of the smart groom. In the act of doing so they encountered a tall, rather distinguished-looking man, who was coming down the steps. He was about forty-two, clean-shaven, with sandy hair; and his clothes had an air of such extreme correctness as to suggest that they had been donned for a special occasion.

The departing visitor bowed elaborately to the two ladies, but each returned the greeting with an abbre-

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viated nod, backed by an intent smile peculiarly her own. There might be courtesy carried to the verge of homage on the one side, but on the other was an aloofness cold and quizzical.

As soon as Blanche and Marjorie had gained the ample precincts of Bridport House each looked demurely at the other, and then yielded a laugh, which seemed to mean a great deal more than it expressed.

"Been to see papa, I suppose," said Blanche, as she waddled duck fashion towards a white marble staircase of grandiose design, whose cinquecento air could not save it from a slight suspicion of the rococo.

"My dear!" came Marjorie's crescendo.

Again they looked at each other, again their laughter snarled and crackled not unpleasantly.

At one o'clock luncheon was announced. Ten minutes later a well-bathed and carefully re-clothed Marjorie and a Blanche to match entered an enormous dining-room, which, in spite of its profusion of servants in livery, had the air of a crypt.

"Good morning, father. Very pleasant to see you down."

Each word of Blanche was charmingly punctuated by a little pause, which might have been taken for filial regard by those who heard it. But the rather acid-looking gentleman, who sat at the head of the table, with a face like a cameo a little out of drawing, and a bowl of arrowroot in front of him, paid such slight attention to Blanche that she might not have spoken at all.

"Good morning, Aunt Charlotte," said Marjorie coolly, taking up her own cue. She surveyed the other occu-

pants of the table with a quietly ironical eye. And then as she seated herself at her leisure, as far as she could get from the object of her remarks, she proceeded in the peculiar but remarkably agreeable voice which she had in common with her father and sisters: "Odd we should run into you coming out of the Park."

"Why odd?" said Aunt Charlotte, an elderly, large-featured blonde, whose theory of life was as far as possible not to cherish illusions on any subject. "I always go in at twelve, you always come out at twelve. Nothing odd about it. Thank you!"

"Thank you," meant, "Yes, I will take claret." It also meant, "Get on with your luncheon, Marjorie, and don't be absurd. Life is too complicated nowadays for such small talk as yours to interest an intelligent person."

Aunt Charlotte, if not consciously rude, was by nature exceedingly dominant. For twenty-five years, in one way or another, Bridport House had known her yoke. She was the Duke's only surviving sister, and she lived in Hill Street, among the dowagers. Her status was *nil*, but her love of power was so great that she had gained an uncomfortable ascendancy in the family councils. While free to admire Aunt Charlotte's wisdom, which was supposed to be boundless, the Dinneford ladies dislike her in the marrow of their bones. But Fate had played against them. Their father had been left a widower with a young family, and from the hour of his loss his sister had taken upon herself to mother it. She had done so to her own satisfaction, but the objects of her regard bore her no gratitude. From Sarah, who was thirty-nine, to Marjorie, who was twenty-eight, they were ever ready to try a fall with Aunt Charlotte.

As for their father, he had an active dislike of her. He had cause, no doubt. More than once he had tried to break the spell of her dominion, but somehow it had always proved too strong for him. It was not that he was a weak man altogether, but there is a type born to female tyranny, an affair of the stars, of human destiny. Charlotte despised her brother. In her view he was a lath painted to look like iron, but insight into character was not her strength. She owed her position in the family to dynamic power, to force of will; but in her own mind it was always ascribed to the fact that she acted invariably from the highest motives.

"Muriel not here," said the conversational Marjorie, looking across the table to Sarah.

"Gone to the East End, I believe, to one of her committees."

It would have been nearer the truth for the eldest flower, who was dealing with a recalcitrant fragment of lobster in a masterful manner, to have said that Muriel had gone to luncheon at Hayes with the Penarths. But Sarah, who did not approve of Muriel, and still less of the Penarths, was content with a general statement whose flagrant inaccuracy somehow crystallized her attitude towards them both. Muriel had become frankly impossible. The higher expediency could no longer take her seriously.

But there are degrees of wisdom, even among the elect. Sarah's place was assured at Minerva's Court, but Marjorie and Blanche were wiser perhaps in matters equine than in other things. Where angels feared to tread Blanche, at any rate, for reasons of her own, had some-

times been known to butt in. A classical instance was about to be furnished.

"Do tell me." Blanche suddenly looked Sarah straight in the eyes. "Has Sir Dugald been to see father?"

There was a long moment's pause in which Sarah maintained a stranglehold upon the lobster, while Lady Wargrave and the Duke, who knew they were being "ragged" by a past mistress in the art, glared daggers down the table.

"I believe so," said Sarah in an exceedingly dry voice, followed by a hardly perceptible glance at the servants.

III

Over the coffee cups, in the solemn privacy of the blue drawing-room, the Dinneford ladies grew a little less laconic. They were in a perfect hurricane of great events. Even they, who seldom use two words if one would suffice, had to make some concession to the pressure of history.

"His mother, I understand," said Aunt Charlotte, seating herself massively in the center of her floridly Victorian picture, "kept the village shop at Ardna-leuchan."

"Then I've bought bull's-eye peppermints of her," said Sarah, with a touch of acid humor which somehow became her quite well.

"But it's so serious"—Lady Wargrave stirred her coffee. "Still he's been given the Home Office—so she thinks she moves with the times, no doubt."

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"*Has* been given the Home Office?" said Blanche, suddenly achieving an air of intelligence.

"The papers say so," said Sarah dryly. "But I don't think that excuses him."

"Or Muriel," interpolated Aunt Charlotte with venom. "What did your father say to the man?"

"He was deplorably rude, I believe—even for father. He said the man had the hide of a rhinoceros, so obviously he had tested it."

"All very amazing. It is charity to assume that Muriel is out of her mind."

"One can't be sure," said Sarah weightily. "She says he has such a good head that one day he *must* be Prime Minister. After all, she will be a Prime Minister's wife!"

"But a Radical Prime Minister's wife!"

"He may rat," said Sarah, with judicious optimism.

"He may," said Lady Wargrave, looking down her long nose. "But there never was a matter in which I felt less hopeful. What does your father think?"

"The man's a red rag. Don't you remember the shameful way he attacked poor father on the Land Question two years ago? What was it he called him in the House of Commons?"

"The Great Panjandrum, with little round button on top," quoted the solemn Marjorie, whose chief social asset was an amazing memory.

"And after that he dares to come here!" Aunt Charlotte quivered majestically. "Didn't your father kick him downstairs?"

"I think he would have done—but for his infirmity," said Sarah judicially.

"I had forgotten his gout, poor man. At least, I hope he ordered the servants to throw the creature into the street."

"One hardly does that, does one?—with his Majesty's Secretaries of State," said Blanche, whose sleepy voice had an odd precision which made each word bite like an acid.

Aunt Charlotte hooded her eyes like a cobra to look at Blanche. But she didn't say anything. Only experts could handle Blanche, and even these must abide the whim of the goddess opportunity.

"After all, why fuss?" continued Blanche with a muted laugh which had the power of annoying all the other ladies extremely. "If one has to marry one might as well marry a Prime Minister."

This was such a sublime expression of the obvious, that even Lady Wargrave, who contested everything on principle, was dumb before it. Blanche was therefore able to retire in perfect order to the comatose, her natural state. But in the next moment she reëmerged, so that a little private thunderbolt she had been diligently nursing through the whole luncheon might shake the rather strained peace of the blue drawing-room. She was quite sure that it would be a pleasure to launch it when the moment came. A sudden pause in the great topic of Muriel's *affaire* told her it had now arrived.

"We saw Jack riding with that girl." So sleepy was the voice of Blanche as it made this announcement that it seemed a wonder she could keep awake.

"What girl?" Aunt Charlotte walked straight into Blanche's little trap.

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"Oh, you *didn't* know." Blanche suppressed a yawn. "It's a rather long story."

Still it had to be told. And Blanche, just able to keep awake, told it circumstantially. The Tenderfoot—the heir's own name for himself, which Blanche made a point of using in conversation with Aunt Charlotte because that lady considered it vulgar—had been seen at the Savoy with a girl, he had been seen in the Park with a girl, he had been seen motoring with a girl; in fact, he had been going about with a girl for several weeks.

"And you never told *me*," said Lady Wargrave with the air of a tragedy queen. She looked from Blanche to Sarah, from Sarah to Marjorie. A light of sour sarcasm in the eye of the eldest flower was all the comfort she took from the survey.

"Who is the girl? Tell me."

Blanche inclined to think an actress. But she was not sure.

"Inquiries will have to be made at once." Already Aunt Charlotte was a caldron of energy. "Steps will have to be taken. It is the first I have heard of it. But I feel I ought to have been told sooner."

Blanche fearlessly asked why.

"Why!" Aunt Charlotte gave a little snort. At such a moment mere words were futile. Then she said, "I shall go at once to your father."

"But what can *he* do?"

"Do?" Aunt Charlotte gave a second little snort. Mere words again revealed their limitations.

"Yes?" Blanche placidly pursued the Socratic method, to the increasing fury of Aunt Charlotte.

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"He can tell him what he thinks of him and threaten to cut off supplies."

"Much he'll care for that!" The cynicism of Blanche revolted Aunt Charlotte.

That lady, whose forte, after all, was plain common-sense, knew that Blanche was right. But in spite of that knowledge, the resolute energy which made her so much disliked impelled her to go at once to lay the matter before the head of the house.

Lady Wargrave found her brother in the smaller library, long dedicated by custom to his sole use. It was one of the less pretentious and therefore least uncomfortable rooms in a house altogether too large to be decently habitable.

For many years the Duke had been at the mercy of a painful malady which had taken all the pleasure out of his life. He was nearly seventy now, a man strikingly handsome in spite of a sufferer's mouth and eyes weary with pain and cynicism. When his sister entered the room she found him deployed on an invalid chair, the *Quarterly Review* on a book-rest in front of him, and a wineglass containing medicine at his elbow. And to Lady Wargrave's clear annoyance, a tall, gray-haired, rather austere-looking, but decidedly handsome woman, stood by the Adam chimney-piece, a bottle in one hand, a teaspoon in the other.

"Perhaps you will be kind enough to leave us, Mrs. Sanderson," said Lady Wargrave, in a tone which sounded needlessly elaborate.

Harriet Sanderson, without so much as a temporary relaxation of muscle of her strong face, withdrew at

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once very silently from the room. The bottle and the teaspoon went with her.

As soon as the door had closed Lady Wargrave said, "Johnnie, once more I feel bound to protest against the presence of the housekeeper in the library. If the state of your health really calls for such attention I will engage a trained nurse."

The Duke took up the *Quarterly Review* with an air of stolid indifference.

"I'll get one at once," she persisted. "There's a capable person who nursed Mary Devizes."

The Duke seemed unwilling to discuss the question, but at last, yielding to pressure, he said in a tone of dry exasperation:

"Mrs. Sanderson is quite capable of looking after me. She understands my ways, I understand hers."

"No one doubts her competence." The rejoinder was tart and hostile. "But that is hardly the point. The library is not the place for the housekeeper."

"I choose to have her here. In any case it is entirely my affair."

"People talk."

"Let 'em."

"It's an old quarrel, my friend." Growing asperity was in the voice of Charlotte. "You know my views on the subject of Mrs. Sanderson. We none of us like the woman. Considering the position she holds she has always taken far too much upon herself."

The Duke shook his head. "I must be the judge of that," he said.

"But surely it is a matter for the women of your family."

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"With all submission, it's a matter for me. I find the present arrangement entirely satisfactory, and I don't recognize the right of anyone to interfere."

The Duke's tone grated like a file upon his sister's ear. This was an ancient quarrel that in one form or another had been going on for very many years. The housekeeper at Buntisford and more recently at Bridport House had been a thorn in the flesh of Charlotte almost from the day her sister-in-law died, but the Duke had always been Mrs. Sanderson's champion. Time and again her overthrow had been decided upon by the ladies of the Family, but up till now the perverse determination of his Grace had proved too much for them and all their careful schemes.

They had reached the usual impasse. Therefore, for the time being, Charlotte had once more to swallow her feelings. Besides, other matters were in the air, matters of an interest more vital if of a nature less permanent.

As a preliminary it was necessary to glance at Muriel and her vagaries, before coming to grips with the even more momentous affair which had just been brought to Lady Wargrave's notice. In answer to his sister's, "What have you said to Maclean?" the Duke, who had swallowed most of the formulas and had digested them pretty thoroughly, expressed himself characteristically.

"I told him that before I could even begin to consider the question he would have to rat."

"Was that wise?" said Charlotte, frowning. "Why commit oneself to the possibility of having to take the man seriously?"

Her brother laughed. "He's a very sharp fellow. A

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long Scotch head, abominably full of brains. If we could get him on our side perhaps he might pull us together."

"You know, of course, that his mother kept the village shop at Ardnaleuchan?"

"So he tells me."

"Do you like the prospect of such a son-in-law?"

"Frankly, Charlotte, I don't. A tiresome business at the best of it. But there it is."

"Ought one to treat it so coolly?"

His Grace laid the *Quarterly Review* on the book-rest and plucked a little peevishly at the tuft of hair on his chin.

"The times are changing, you see. We are on the eve of strange things. Still, I took the liberty of telling him that as long as he remained a Radical and went up and down the country blackguarding me and mine, I should refuse to know him."

"And what said our fine gentleman?"

"He was amused. Whether he takes the hint remains to be seen. In any event it commits us to nothing."

Charlotte shook a dubious head. "You're shaping for a compromise, my friend. And in my view this is not a case for one."

"If she is set on marrying the brute what's going to stop her?"

The question was meant for a poser and a poser it proved. Somehow it left no ground for argument. Therefore, without further preface or apology, Lady Wargrave turned to a matter of even more vital consequence.

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IV

By an odd chain of events, Jack Dinneford was heir apparent to the dukedom of Bridport. In the course of a brief twelve months two intervening lives had petered out. One had been Lyme, the Duke's only surviving son, who at the age of thirty-five had been killed in a shooting accident—a younger son, never a good life, had died some years earlier—the other had been the Duke's younger brother, who six months ago had died without male issue. The succession in consequence would now have to pass to an obscure and rather neglected branch of the family, represented by a young man of twenty-four, the son of a Norfolk parson.

Jack's father, at the time of his death, had held a family living. A retiring, scholarly man, he had never courted the favors of the great, and the great, little suspecting that their vicarious splendors might one day be his, had paid him little attention. Blessed with progeny of the usual clerical abundance and without means apart from his stipend, the incumbent of Wickley-on-the-Wold had been hard set to educate his children in a manner becoming their august lineage. Even Jack, the eldest of five, had to be content with four years at one of the smaller public schools. It was true that afterwards he had the option of Oxford or Sandhurst, but by the time the young man had reached the age of nineteen he had somehow acquired an independence of character which did not take kindly to either.

One fine day, with a spare suit of clothes and a hundred pounds or so in his pocket, he set out in the most casual way to see the world, and to make his for-

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tune. He went to Liverpool, shipped before the mast as an ordinary seaman for the sake of the experience, and made the voyage round the Horn to San Francisco. For the next two years he prospected up and down the America's earning a living, picking up ideas, and enlarging his outlook by association with all sorts and conditions of men, and finally invested all the capital he could scrape together in a business in Vancouver.

After eighteen months of the new life came the news of his father's death. The brothers and sisters it seemed were rather better provided for than there had been reason to expect. At any rate, Mabel and Iris would have a roof over their heads, Bill had passed into Sandhurst, and Frank was at Cambridge. Therefore Jack, little guessing what Fate had in store, decided to stay as he was, in the hope that in a few years he would have made his pile. He had a taste for hard work, and the new land offered opportunities denied by the old.

Some months later he received an urgent summons to return home. He had suddenly and unexpectedly become next of kin to the Duke of Bridport. The news was little to the young man's taste. He was very loth to give up a growing business for a life of parasitic idleness under the ægis of the titular great. But the circumstances seemed to make it imperative. The powers that were had not the slightest doubt that it was his bounden duty to go into training at once. He must fit himself for the dizzy eminence to which it had pleased Providence to call him.

Sadly enough the tiro sold out, returned to England, and in due course reported himself at Bridport House. It was the first time he had been there. He was such

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a distant kinsman that he had never taken the ducal connection seriously.

The family's reception of the Tenderfoot—his own humorous name for himself—amused him considerably, yet at the same time it filled him with a subtle annoyance. Five fruitful years out West had made him an iconoclast. He saw with awakened eyes the arid and sterile pomposities which were doing their best to put the old land out of the race. Bridport House was going to spell boredom and worse for Jack Dinneford.

Still the Duke, as became a man of the world, soon got to the root of the trouble, and having the welfare of a time-honored institution at heart, was at pains to deal with the novice tactfully. All the same, he was far from being pleased by the tricks of Providence. But he made the young man an allowance of two thousand a year, and exhorted him not to get into mischief; and the Dinneford ladies, who were prepared to be kind to the Tenderfoot and to be more amused by his "originality" than they confessed to each other, chose some rooms for him in Arlington Street, looked after his general welfare, and began to make plans for the future of Bridport House. Aunt Charlotte took him at once under an ungracious wing, and found him a bear-leader in the person of her nephew Wrexham, a subaltern of the Pinks, a picturesque young man, reputed a paragon of all the Christian virtues, and a martyr to a sense of duty.

From this model of discretion the tiro soon received a hint. Cousin Sarah owned to thirty-eight in the glare of Debrett, Cousin Muriel had other views apparently, but there remained Cousin Blanche and Cousin Marjorie

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—the heir could take his choice, but the ukase had gone forth that one of them it must be.

The Tenderfoot did not feel in a marrying mood just then, but he had chivalry enough not to say so to his mentor, who as the messenger of Eros began to disclose quite a pretty turn of humor. It was not seemly to offer advice in such a delicate matter, but Blanche was a nailer to hounds, although she never kept awake after dinner, while Marjorie's sphere was church decoration in times of festival, in the course of which she generally had an *affaire* with a curate.

Face to face with a problem which in one way or another was kept ever before his eyes, the poor Tenderfoot seemed to feel that if wive he must in the charmed circle, and the relentless Wrexham assured him that it was a solemn duty, perhaps there was most to be said for Cousin Marjorie. She was not supremely attractive it was true. The Dinneford girls, one and all, were famous up and down the island for a resolute absence of charm. And the Dinneford frontispiece, imposing enough in the male, when rendered in terms of the female somehow seemed to lack poetry. Still Cousin Marjorie was not yet thirty and her general health was excellent.

The heir had now been settled in Arlington Street six months. And with nothing in the world to do but learn to live a life which threatened to bore him exceedingly, time began to hang upon his hands. Moreover, the prospect of having presently to lead Cousin Marjorie to the altar merely increased a sense of malaise. Here was an arbitrary deepening of the tones of a picture which heaven knew was dark enough already. For a modern and virile young man, life at Bridport House

would only be tolerable under very happy conditions. To be yoked, willy-nilly, to one of its native denizens for the rest of one's days, seemed a hardship almost too great to be borne.

While the Tenderfoot was in this frame of mind, which inclined him to temporize, he decided to put off the dark hour as long as he could. And then suddenly, while still besieged by doubt, the hypnotic Princess Bedalia swam into his ken.



"It was bound to happen," said Lady Wargrave. "That young man has far too much time on his hands. A thousand pities he didn't go into the army."

"Too old, too old." Her brother frowned portentously. "This promises to be a very tiresome business. Charlotte, I must really ask you to lose no time in seeing that the fellow marries."

It was now Charlotte's turn to frown. And this she did as a prelude to a frankness which verged upon the brutal.

"All very well, my friend, but perhaps you'll tell me how it's to be done. Neither Marjorie nor Blanche has the least power of attraction. They're hopeless. And please remember this young man has been five years in America."

"I would to God he had stayed there!"

The futile outburst of his Grace set Charlotte glowering like a sibyl. She was constrained to own that it was all intensely annoying. He was a common young man. He had none of the Dinneford feeling about things.

"Quite so, Charlotte." The ducal irritation was growing steadily. "But don't rub it in. That won't help us. Let us think constructively. You see the trouble is that this fellow has a rather democratic outlook."

"Then I'm afraid there's no remedy," said Charlotte, "unless the girls have the brains to help us, which, of course, they haven't."

His Grace became more thunderous. "Let us hope he'll have the good feeling to try to look at things as we do," he said after a rather arid pause.

"I'm not sure that we've a right to expect it," was the frank rejoinder.

"Why not?"

"His branch of the family has no particular cause to be grateful to us."

"Our father gave his father a living, didn't he?" said the Duke sharply.

"Yes, but nothing else—unless it was a day's shooting now and again, which he didn't accept."

"I don't see what else he could have given him."

"An eye ought to have been kept on this young man."

"You can depend upon it, Charlotte, many things would have been ordered differently had there been reason to suppose that this confounded fellow would be next in here. As it is we have to make the best of a sorry business."

"Sorry enough," Charlotte admitted. "There I am with you. But I'll have inquiries made about this chorus girl. And in the meantime, Johnnie, perhaps you will speak to him firmly and quietly without losing your temper."

"And my last word to you, Charlotte," countered his

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Grace, "is to see that he loses no time in marrying."

"Easy, my friend, to issue a ukase." And the redoubtable Charlotte smiled grimly.

VI

Soon after four the same afternoon Jack returned to Broad Place in the garb of civilization. He was in great heart. Milly had some good-natured chaff to offer as to Mary's need of sticking plaster. But the young man turned this persiflage aside with such a serious air that the quick-witted Milly knew it for an omen. Having learned the set of the wind she soon found a pretext for leaving them together.

Milly's sense of a coming event, which her sudden flight from the room had seemed to make the more inevitable, was shared by Mary. Somehow she felt that the moment of moments had come. This thing had to be. But as a hand brown and virile quietly took hers in a strong grip, she began almost bitterly to deplore the whole business. And yet, when all was said, she was absolutely thrilled. He was so truly a man that a girl, no matter what her talent and quality, could hardly refrain from pride in his homage.

There was no beating about the bush.

"Will you marry me?" he said.

She grew crimson. How she had dreaded that long foreseen question! Days ago common sense and worldly prudence had coldly informed her that there could only be one possible answer. The case of Milly herself had furnished a sinister parallel. And the sensitive, perhaps over-sensitive pride of one who had begun at the bottom of the ladder, revolted from all the ensuing complica-

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tions. Such a situation seemed now to involve her in mysteries far down within, at the very core of being—mysteries she had hardly been aware of until that moment.

Again the question. She looked away, quite unable just then to meet his eyes. Her will was strong, her determination clear, but in spite of herself a deadly feeling crept upon her that she was a bird in a snare. Certain imponderables were in the room. The life forces were calling to each other; there was a curious magnetism in the very air they breathed.

She had meant and intended "No," but every instant made that little word more difficult to utter. A dominant nature had stolen the keys of her heart before she knew it. And as she fought against the inevitable, a subtle trick of the ape on the chain in the human breast, weighed the scales unfairly. Cousin Blanche and Cousin Marjorie were flung oddly, irrelevantly, fantastically, upon the curtain of her mind. The challenge of their ironical eyes was like a knife in the flesh. And then that private, particular devil, of whose existence, until that moment, she had been unaware, suddenly forced her to take up the gage those eyes had flung.

VII

"Do tell me!" cried Milly the breathless.

The sight of a lone, troubled Mary in the little sitting-room, the look on her face as she twisted a handkerchief into knots and coils had been too much for Milly. She was a downright person and the silence of Mary was so trying to a forthcoming nature that the query at the

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tip of Milly's tongue seemed likely to burn a hole in it.

"Has he—have you—did he——?" The demand was indelicate, but it sprang from the depths as Milly measured them. Suddenly she saw tears.

"I am so glad, I am so *very* glad!"

Mary smiled, but the look in her eyes had the power to startle the affectionate Milly.

"He is the luckiest man I know, but he is such a dear that he deserves to be." It was a peculiarity of Mary's that she didn't like kissing, but Milly in a burst of loyal affection was guilty of a sudden swoop upon her friend.

"Oh, don't," said Mary, in a voice from which all the accustomed gayety was gone.

Milly gazed in consternation.

"You—you have not refused him?"

"No." And then there came a sudden flame. "I'm a selfish, egotistical wretch."

"As long as you have not refused him," said Milly, breathing again. "All the same, I call you a very odd girl."

But Mary was troubled, Milly perplexed.

"You ought to be the happiest creature alive. What's the matter?"

"I'm thinking of his friends."

"If they choose to be stupid, it's their own lookout."

"It mayn't be stupidity," said Mary, giving her handkerchief a bite. "I know nothing about him, except——"

"Except?"

"That he's above me socially."

"I wouldn't worry about that if I were you," said Milly robustly. "If they like to be snobs it's their own funeral."

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But Mary, having burned her boats, was afflicted now by Cousin Blanche and Cousin Marjorie. They were looking down upon her from their tall horses. It was not that she feared them in the least, but she knew that lurking somewhere in an oddly constituted mind was a certain awe of the things for which they stood.

"I can't explain my feelings," said Mary. "I only know they are horribly real. I feel there's a gulf between Jack and me—and a word won't bridge it." And her voice trailed off miserably.

"That's weak," said Milly severely. "I know what you mean, but you exaggerate the difference absurdly. Sonny is miles above me socially, but I'll make him as good a wife as any of his own push, see if I don't—if he gives me the chance! And in some ways I can make him a better."

"How?"

"Because I began right down there." Milly pointed to the carpet. "I know the value of things, I shall be able to see that no one takes advantage of him, whereas a girl who has been spoon-fed all her life couldn't do that."

The honest Mary had to allow that there was something to be said for the point of view, yet she would not admit that it covered all the facts of the case.

"Please don't suppose my ideas have anything to do with you and Lord Wrexham." Her gravity made Milly feel quite annoyed. "I am merely thinking of myself. And there's something in me, for which I can't account, which says that it may be wrong, it may be wickedly wrong, for me to marry Jack."

"It certainly will be if that's how you look at it," said

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Milly scornfully. "Why not make the most of your luck? I'm sure it's right. After all Providence knows better than anybody. And Jack knows he's got to be a duke."

"Got to be what?" Mary jumped out of her chair.

"You didn't know?"

"Of course, I didn't." She was simply aghast. In a state of excitement which quite baffled Milly, she paced the room.

"You *odd* creature!" The mantle of the arch dissembler had now descended upon Milly.

Truth to tell, she and her mother had had a shrewd suspicion of Mary's ignorance. They had learned from Wrexham that Jack Dinneford, owing to a series of deaths in a great family, had quite unexpectedly become the next-of-kin to the Duke of Bridport. Such a prospect was so little to the young man's taste that as far as he could he always made a point of keeping the skeleton out of sight. Rightly or wrongly he had not said a word to Mary on the subject, and she with a pride a little overstrained, no doubt, had allowed herself no curiosity in regard to his worldly status. For whatever it might be it was obviously far removed from that of a girl of no family who had to get her own living as well as she could.

The news was stunning. As Mary walked about the room the look on her face was almost tragic.

"I think you ought to have told me," she said at last.

"We thought you knew," was Milly's reply. This was a deliberate story. Mrs. Wren and herself in discussing the romantic news had concluded the exact opposite. But out of a true regard for Mary's welfare, as

they conceived it, they had decided to let her find out for herself. She was such an odd girl in certain ways that mother and daughter felt that the real truth about Jack Dinneford might easily prove his overthrow. Thus with a chaste conscience Milly now lied royally.

Mary, alas! was so resentful of the *coup* of fortune and her friends, that for a moment she was tempted to fix a quarrel on Milly. But Milly's cunning was too much for her. She stuck to the simple statement that she thought she knew. There was no gainsaying it. And if blame there was in the matter it surely lay at the door of her own proud self.

Mary was still in the throes of an unwelcome discovery when Mrs. Wren came into the room. The appearance of that lady seemed to add fuel to the flame. Her felicitations, a little overwhelming in their exuberance, were in nowise damped by the girl's dejection. To Mrs. Wren such an attitude of mind was not merely unreasonable, it was unchristian. To call in question the highest gifts of Providence betrayed a kink in a charming character.

"Fancy, my dear—a duchess. You'll be next in rank to royalty."

It was so hard for the victim to smother the tempest within that for the moment she dare not trust herself to speak.

"You're very naughty," said Mrs. Wren. "Why, you ought to offer up a prayer. You've had success too easily, the road has been too smooth. If you'd had a smaller talent and you'd had an awful struggle to get there, you'd know better than to crab your luck."

A strong will now came to Mary's aid. And the calm

force of her answer, when at last she was able to make it, astonished Milly and her mother. "That's one side of the case, Mrs. Wren," she said in a new tone. "But there's another, you know."

"There is only one side for you, my dear," said the older woman stoutly. "Take your chances while you may—that's my advice. Your luck may turn. You'll not always be what you are now. Suppose you have a bad illness?"

"I'm thinking of his side of the case." The tone verged upon sternness.

"You have quite enough to do to think of your own. Don't throw chances away. I have had forty years' experience of a very hard profession, and even you top sawyers are on very thin ice. And remember, the cards never forgive. Girls who have a lone hand to play, mustn't hold their heads too high. If they do they'll live to regret it. And you mustn't think these swells can't box their own corner. They've nothing to learn in looking after Number One. A girl of your sort is quite equal to any of these drawing-room noodles and Mr. Dinneford knows that better than I do."

"But that's impossible. I can never be as they are."

"You needn't let that worry you. A lot of stuck-up dunces that all the world kow-tows to!"

"It isn't that I think they are nicer or cleverer or wiser than other people. But they are born to certain things, they have been bred to them for generations, and it surely stands to reason that they are better at their own game than a mere outsider can hope to be."

"Fiddle-de-dee!" said Mrs. Wren. "I hope you are not such a goose as to take swelldom at its own valua-

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tion. It's all a bluff, my dear. Your humble servant, Jane Wren, could have been as good a duchess as the best of 'em if she had been given the chance. I don't want to be fulsome, my dear, but I'll back a girl of your brains against Lady Agatha Fitzboodle or any other titled snob."

"But I don't want to be pitted against anybody!"

"That's nonsense." Mrs. Wren shook a worldly-wise head. "As for being an outsider, a girl can't be more than a lady just as a man can't be more than a gentleman. And if you *are* a lady and have always gone straight you needn't fear comparison with the highest in the land."

Mary shook a head of sadness and perplexity.

"Somehow it doesn't seem right to mix things in that way," she said.

"It's the only way that keeps 'em going," said Mrs. Wren scornfully. "And well they know it. At least nature knows it. Look at Wrexham! Do you mean to say that his inbred strain wouldn't be improved by Milly? And it's the same with you and Mr. Dinneford. It's Nature at the back of it all. It's the call of the blood. If these old families keep on intermarrying long enough dry rot sets in."

Mary stood a picture of woe.

"You odd creature!" said Mrs. Wren. "I've never met a girl with such ideas as yours. I really believe you are quite as narrow and as prejudiced as Lady Agatha Fitzboodle. To hear you talk one would think you believed rank to be a really important matter."

Incredulous eyes were opened upon the voluble dame.

"Of course it is." But the girl's solemnity was a little too much.

"My dear!" A gust of ribald laughter overwhelmed her. "Hasn't it ever struck you that the so-called aristocracy racket is all a bluff?"

"Surely, it can't be." The tone was genuine dismay.

"Every word of it, my dear. There's only one thing behind it and that's money. If Wrexham ever sticks a coronet on the head of my Milly and robes her in ermine she'll be the equal of any in the land, just as old Bill Brown who was in the last birthday honors is as good a peer as the best of 'em now that his soap business has brought him into Park Lane. I knew Bill when he hadn't a bob. It's just a matter of L.S.D. As for the frills, they are all my eye and Elizabeth Martin. When my Milly gets among them, it won't take her a week to learn all their tricks. They are just so many performing dogs."

"You don't understand, you don't understand!" The tone was tragic.

VIII

A night's reflection convinced the girl that there was only one thing to be done. The engagement must end. But as she soon found, it was easier to make the resolve than to carry it out. To begin with, it was terribly irksome, in present circumstances, to give effect to her decision and to back it with reasons.

Her début in the Row had been so successful that a ride had been arranged for the next morning. But it was spoiled completely by the specter now haunting her.

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In what terms could she tell him that she had changed her mind? How could she defend a proceeding so unwarrantable?

It was not until later in the day, when they took a stroll under the trees in the Park, that she forced herself to grasp the nettle boldly.

Jack, as she had foreseen, was immeasurably astonished. He called, at once, for her reasons. And they were terribly difficult to put into words. At last she was driven back upon the cardinal fact that he had concealed his true position.

He repudiated the charge indignantly. In the first place, he had taken it for granted that she knew his position, in the second, he always made a point of leaving it as much as possible outside his calculations.

"But isn't that just what one oughtn't to do?" she said, as they took possession of a couple of vacant chairs.

"To me the whole thing's absurd," was the rejoinder. "It's only by the merest fluke that I have to succeed to the title, and I find it quite impossible to feel about things as Bridport House does. The whole business is a great bore, and if a way out could be found I'd much rather stay as I am."

"But isn't that just a wee bit selfish, my dear—if you don't think me a prig?"

"If you are quite out of sympathy with an antediluvian system, if you disbelieve in it, if you hate it in the marrow of your bones, where's the virtue in sacrificing yourself in order to maintain it?"

"Noblesse oblige!"

"Yes, but does it? A dukedom, in my view, is just an outworn convention, a survival of a darker age."

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"It stands for something."

"What does it stand for?—that's the point. There's no damned merit about it, you know. Any fool can be a duke, and they mostly are."

Mary, if a little amused, was more than a little stocked.

"I'm sure it's not right to think that," she declared stoutly. "I would say myself, although one oughtn't to have a say on the subject, that it's the duty of your sort of people to keep things going."

"They are not my sort of people. I was pitchforked among them. And if you don't believe in them and the things it is their duty to keep going what becomes of your theory, Miss Scrupulous?"

"But that's Socialism," said Mary with solemn eyes.

"No, it's the common sense of the matter. All this centralization of power in the hands of a few hard-shells like my Uncle Albert—he's not my uncle really—is very bad for the State. He owns one-fifth of Scotland, and the only things he ever really takes seriously are his meals and his health."

"He stands for something all the same."

The young man laughed outright.

"I know I'm a prig." The blushing candor disarmed him. "But if one has a great bump of reverence I suppose one can't help exaggerating one's feelings a little."

"I suppose not," laughed the young man. And then there was a pause. "By jove," he said at the end of it, "you'd be the last word in duchesses."

"You won't get Bridport House to think so."

"So much the worse for Bridport House. Of course, I admit it has other views for me. But the trouble is,

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as always in these close corporations, they haven't the art of seeing things as they are."

Mary shook a troubled head, but the argument seemed to find its way home.

"The truth of the matter is," he suddenly declared, "you are afraid of Bridport House."

Without shame she confessed that Bridport House was bound to be very hostile, and was there not every reason for such an attitude? Jack, however, would not yield an inch upon that count, or on any other if it came to that. He was a primitive creature in whom the call of the blood was paramount. Moreover, he was a very tenacious fellow. And these arguments of hers, strongly urged and boldly stated, did not affect his point of view. The ban of Fortune was purely artificial, it could not be defended. She was fain, therefore, to carry the war to the enemy's country. But if she gently hinted a change of egotism he countered it astutely with the subtler one of sentimentalism. Each confessed the other partially right, but so far from clearing the air it seemed to make the whole matter more complex. The upshot was that he called upon her to find a valid reason, otherwise he refused point-blank to give her up.

"Just think," he said, tracing her name on the gravel with a walking-stick, "how hollow the whole business is. How many of Uncle Albert's 'push' have married American wives without a question? And why do they, when they wouldn't think of giving English girls of the same class an equal chance? In the first place, for the sake of the dollars, in the second, because it is so easy for them to shed their relations and forget their origin."

But so wide was the gulf between their points of view

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that mere argument could not hope to bridge it. If she was in grim earnest, so was he; moreover she had entered into a compact he was determined she should fulfill. Before consenting to release her she would have to show very good cause at any rate.

Suddenly, in the give-and-take of conflict, Laxton came into her mind. The memory of Beaconsfield Villas, the whimsical creatures of another orbit, and the childhood which now seemed ages away, fired her with a new idea. She would take him to see the humble people among whom she had been brought up.

CHAPTER VI

ALARUMS AND EXCURSIONS

I

THE flight of time had affected Beaconsfield Villas surprisingly little. Laxton itself had deferred to Anno Domini in many subtle ways; it had its electric trams and motor-buses, and the suburb had doubled in size, but no epoch-making changes were visible in the front sitting-room of Number Five. In that homely interior the cosmic march and profluence was simply revealed by a gramophone, the gift of Mary, on the top of the sewing machine in the corner, and by the accession to the walls of lithograph portraits of the son and grandson of the august lady who still held pride of place over the chimney-piece.

The afternoon was stifling even for South London in the middle of June. And Joseph Kelly, who had attained the rank of sergeant in the Metropolitan Police Force, not having to go on duty until six o'clock that evening, was seated coatless and solemn, spectacles on nose, smoking a well-colored clay and reading the *Daily Mail*. At the level of his eyes, in portentous type was, "Laxton Bye-Election. A Sharp Contest. New Home Secretary's Chances." Joe was a shade stouter than of yore, his face was even redder, a thinning thatch had

turned gray, but in all essentials the man himself was still the genial cockney of one-and-twenty years ago.

The outer door of the sitting-room, which was next the street, was wide open to invite the air. But ever and again there rose such a fierce medley of noises from a mysterious cause a little distance off, that at last Joe got up from his chair, and waddling across the room in a pair of worn list slippers, banged the door against the sounds from the street which had the power to annoy him considerably.

Hardly had Joe shuffled back to his chair and his newspaper when the door was flung open again and an excited urchin thrust a tousled head into the room.

"'Vote for Maclean an' a free breakfast-table'!"

The law in the person of Sergeant Kelly rose from its chair majestically.

"If you ain't off—my word!"

Headlong flight of the urchin. Joe closed the door with violence and sat down again. But the incident had unsettled him. He seemed unable to fix his mind on the newspaper. And the noises in the street waxed ever louder. Now they took the form of cheers and counter cheers, now of hoots, cat-calls and shouts of derision. At last the tumult rose to such a pitch that it drew Eliza from an inner room.

The years had changed her rather more than her husband. But she was still the active, capable, bustling housewife, with a keen eye for the world and all that was passing in it.

"They are making noise enough to wake the dead." Eliza looked eagerly through the window.

"I wish that durned Scotchman hadn't set his com-

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mittee-room plumb oppersite Number Five, Beaconsfield Villas," was Joe's sour comment.

At that moment the all-embracing eye of a relentless housewife swooped down upon a card lying innocently on the linoleum. It had been flung there by the recent visitor. Eliza picked it up and read:

Vote for Maclean, thus:

MACLEAN X

WHITLEY.

On the back of the card was a portrait of Sir Dugald Maclean, M.P.

Eliza gazed at it in astonishment mingled with awe.

"I am bound to say he is a better-favored jockey than when he came a-courting our Harriet. Look, Joe!"

With scornful vehemence, Joe declined the invitation.

Eliza was sternly advised to tear up the card, but instead she chose to set it on the chimney-piece. The rash act was too much for her lord. Once more he rose from his chair, tore the card into little pieces and flung them into a grate artistically decorated with colored paper.

"You are jealous!" said Eliza, laughing.

"Of the likes of him! Holy smoke! But if you think we are going to have such trash in the same room as the Marquis, you make an error."

The words had hardly been uttered when shouts yet more piercing came from the street. Eliza made a hasty return to the window.

"Come and look, Joe!" she cried breathlessly. "Here

he is with his top hat and eyeglass. He's that dossy you wouldn't know him. He's dressed up like a tailor's dummy."

But Joe declined to budge.

"It fairly makes me sick to think of the feller," he said.

A little later, when the tumult in the street had died down a bit, Joe settled himself in his chair for an afternoon nap. Eliza, duly noting the symptoms, retired on tiptoe to another room, closing the door after her gently. But today, alas, the skyey influences were adverse. Joe had barely entered oblivion when a smart tap at the street door shattered this precarious peace. With a grudge against society he rose once more, shambled across the room and flung open the door, half expecting to find that the urchin had returned to torment him. A dramatic surprise was in store. On the threshold was a creature so stylishly trim that even the blasé eye of the Metropolitan Force was sensibly thrilled in beholding her. "A bit of class" without a doubt, although adorned by the colors of the People's Candidate, and surprisingly cool in sheer defiance of the thermometer.

"Good afternoon!" The tone of half-confidential intimacy was quite irresistible. "May I have a little talk with you?"

"Certainly, miss." The unconscious gallantry of an impressionable policeman was more than equal to the occasion. "Step inside and make yourself at home."

When Joe came to review the incident afterwards, it seemed very surprising that he should have yielded so easily to the impact of this elegant miss. For instinctively he knew her business. Moreover, the last thing

he desired at that moment was to be troubled by her or by it. But he had been taken by surprise, and in all circumstances he would have needed ample notice to deny a lady. He had a great but impersonal regard for a lady, as some people have for a Rembrandt or a Corot or a Jan van Steen. And although the fact was not important, perhaps his sense of humor was a little touched by such a young woman taking the trouble to come and talk to such a man as himself.

"I am here," said the voice of the dove, as soon as its owner had subsided gracefully upon a chair covered with horsehair, "to ask your vote and interest for Sir Dugald Maclean, the People's Candidate."

The prophetic soul of Joe had told him that already. But again the sense of humor, the fatal gift, may have intervened. Had the elegant miss had any *nous*, she would have known that a sergeant of the X Division has not a vote to bestow. In justice to the fair democrat, Joe might have reflected that in the absence of his tunic there was nothing to show his status. However, he didn't trouble to do that. It was enough for him that she was on a fool's errand. But Joe was a man of the world as well as a connoisseur of the human female. A picturesque personality intrigued him. Moreover, it was working for a cause that Joe despised from the depths of his soul. So much was she "the real thing" that she had even turned on a melodious lisp for his benefit; yet he had no particular wish, even under these flattering auspices, to discuss the people and their champion. He had quite made up his mind about both. But, the Machiavellian thought occurred to him, here was a dangerous implement in the hands of the foe, therefore

it would be the part of wisdom to waste a little of her time.

"'Government of the people, by the people, for the people,'" lisped the siren, "that, of course, as you may know, is what Sir Dugald stands for."

"Does he!" reflected Joe. With a roguish smile he looked the speaker over from her expensive top to her equally expensive toe.

"You *do* believe in the people?" said the siren with a rather dubious air.

"Since you ask the question, miss," said Joe, "I am bound to say I don't, and never have done."

"Not believe in the *people*!" It didn't seem possible.

"If you'd seen as much of the people as I have, miss," said Joe grimly, "I'm thinking you'd not be quite so set up with 'em."

The tone of conviction disconcerted the fair canvasser. Somehow she had not expected it. In the course of her present ministrations it was the first time she had met that point of view. Laxton's working-class, which for several days had been honored by her delicate flatteries, had shown such a robust faith in itself and had purred so responsively to her blandishments that she now took for granted that in all circumstances it would fully share her own enthusiasm for it. But this rubicund, coatless Briton, with eyes of half truculent humor, was a little beyond her. Gloves were needed to handle him; otherwise fingers of such flowerlike delicacy stood a chance of being bruised.

"May one ask what you have against them?" lisped the people's champion, opening large round eyes.

"Nothing particular, miss," said Joe urbanely. "But

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you ask me whether I believe in 'em and I say I don't. Mind you, the people are all right in their place. I've not a word to say against 'em personally. Of a Monday morning at Vine Street, when the Court has been swept an' dusted and his Worship has returned from his Sunday in the country, we always try to make 'em welcome. 'Let 'em all come,' that's the motto of the Metropolitan Force. But as for *believing* in 'em, that's another story."

This was rather baffling for the people's champion. She was at a loss. But her faith was sublime. This odd, crass, heavy-witted plebeian who denied his kind was a sore problem even for the bringer of the light. Still, she stuck to her guns gallantly.

"'Government of the people, by the people, for the people.'" Lipping the battle cry of Demos she returned stoutly to the charge. Sacred formulas flowed from her lips in a stream of charming pellucidity.

"Ah, you don't know 'em, miss," ejaculated Joe, at intervals.

It was a pretty joust; vicarious enthusiasm on the one side, first-hand experience on the other. But Joe was a rock. The fair canvasser took forth every weapon of an elegantly-furnished armory, yet without avail.

"I don't hold with the people, miss, not in no shape nor form."

The tone was so final that at last a sense of defeat came upon this Amazon. She was still seated, however, without having quite made up her mind to the inevitable, on her grand chair in the front sitting-room of Number Five, Beaconsfield Villas, when Fate intervened in quite a remarkable way.

All of a sudden, there appeared on the threshold of the

open door a figure tall, fine and unheralded. It was that of Harriet Sanderson.

"Anybody at home?" she inquired gayly.

The unexpected visitor was looking very handsome and distinguished in a well-cut black coat and skirt, and a large hat too plain for fashion, but very far from *démodé*. She came into the room with that almost proprietary air she was never without in her intercourse with her own people. But it was about to suffer an eclipse.

Harriet just had time to greet her brother-in-law with a happy mingling of the *bon camarade* and the woman of the world, her fixed attitude towards such an Original, whom somehow she could not help liking and respecting, when her eyes met suddenly those of the fair canvasser.

For a moment an intense surprise forbade either to speak. But the people's champion was the first to overcome the shock.

"Mrs. Sanderson!" she exclaimed.

The change in Harriet was immediate and dramatic.

"Lady Muriel!" A slight flush of a fine face accompanied the tone of awe.

The visitor rose. And in the act of so doing an accession of great ladyhood, almost entirely absent a few minutes ago, seemed automatically to enter her manner.

"What a small world it is!" she laughed. "Fancy meeting you here!"

By now the iron will of the secretly annoyed and oddly discomposed Harriet was able to reassert itself.

"It is a small world, my lady." The tone was a very delicate mingling of aloofness and respect.

Brief explanations followed. These quickly cul-

minated in the presentation of Joe, who then became the most embarrassed of the three. Unawares and in his shirt sleeves, he had been entertaining an angel. And to one of Conservative views, with a profound reverence for law, order and all established things, this seemed to verge upon indecency. A mere "one of Scotchie's lady canvassers" had been magically transformed, in the twinkling of an eye, into Lady Muriel Dinneford, the third daughter of one whom Number Five, Beaconsfield Villas, always alluded to as "his Grace."

II

It was the work of a few tactful minutes for Lady Muriel to effect a discreet retirement from the scene. Yet so deeply had she been engaged by Joe's contumacy, and at the back of a mind which was making the most heroic efforts to be "broad" was such a sense of amusement, that she declared her intention of returning anon with the People's Candidate, if he could possibly spare a few minutes from his multifarious duties, in order that the *coup de grâce* might be given to Mr. Kelly's dangerous heresies.

The withdrawal of the distinguished visitor across the street to the Candidate's committee room left a void which for a few tense moments only wonder could fill.

It was Joe who broke the silence which, like a pall, had suddenly descended upon the front parlor of Number Five.

"If that don't beat Banagher," he said. "Fancy one of the Fam'ly taking the trouble to come a canvassin' for Scotchie!"

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Keen humor and acute annoyance contended now in the eloquent face of Harriet.

"Pray, why shouldn't she canvass for Sir Dugald Maclean"—the level voice was pitched in a very quiet key—"if she really believes in his principles?"

"How can she believe in 'em, gal?"

"Why not?"

"How can a blue blood believe in that sort of a feller?"

"Sir Dugald is a remarkably clever man. One of the cleverest men in England, some people think."

"That's nothing to do with the matter. It's character that counts."

"There's nothing against his character, I believe. At any rate, Lady Muriel is going to marry him."

The state of Joe's feelings forbade an immediate reply. And when reply he did, it was in a tone of scorn. Said he: "'Government of the people, by the people, for the people!' Harriet, for a dead beat fool give me a blue blood aristocrat."

"Joe," came the answer, with a gleam of humor and malice, "I really think you should learn to speak of our governing class a little more respectfully."

This was rather hard. She ought to have realized that it was because Joe respected them so much that he now desired to chasten them.

"Scotchie of all people!" he muttered.

"There's no accounting for taste, you know." There was a sudden flash of a very handsome pair of eyes.

"O' course there ain't," said Joe, sorrowfully malicious. "You may have forgot there was a time when Scotchie came a-courtin' you."

"Do you suppose I am ever likely to forget it!" said

Harriet, with a cool cynicism which took the simple Joseph completely out of his depth.

"Well, it's a queer world, I must say."

"It is," his sister-in-law agreed.

At that moment, Eliza came into the room. The visit of Harriet was so unexpected as to take her by surprise. But the cause of it was soon disclosed. Harriet was troubled about Mary. Ever since the girl, against the wishes and advice of her friends, had taken what they felt to be a fatal step, there had been a gradual drifting apart. Harriet had kept in touch with her as well as she could, but she had not been able to stifle her own private fears. The peril of such a career, even when crowned by success, was in her opinion, difficult to exaggerate. She disapproved of the friendship with the Wren's, and had strongly opposed Mary's living with them. But as the girl rose in her profession, Harriet's hold upon her grew still less. And now at second and third hand had come news which had greatly upset her.

With the tact for which she was famous, Harriet did not speak of this in the presence of Joe. She accompanied Eliza to the privacy of the best bedroom, ostensibly to "take off her things," but really to discuss a matter which for the past week had filled her with misgiving.

In the meantime, Joe in the parlor set himself doggedly to compass the nap that so far had been denied him. In spite of the noises in the street and romantic appearance of a real live member of the Family in his humble abode, he had just begun to doze when the ban of Fate fell once more upon him.

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From the strange welter in the amazing world outside there now emerged a large open motor. And royally it drew up before the magic door of Number Five. Two persons were seated in the car. One was no less than Princess Bedalia. The other was the humblest and yet the boldest of her adorers.

III

The idea itself had been Mary's that they should use a fine afternoon in motoring into Laxton, in order to see her parents. Behind this simple plan was fell design. A week had passed since that conversation under the trees in the Park in which she had sought in vain for her release. But so shallow had her reasoning appeared that Jack declined to take it seriously. He had her promise, and he felt he had every right to hold her to it. Unless she could show a real cause for revoking it, he was fully determined not to give her up.

In desperation, therefore, she had hit on the expedient, a poor and vain one, no doubt, of taking him to see those humble people whom she called father and mother. In the course of her twenty odd years up and down the world she had had intimations from various side winds and divers little birds that she was an adopted child. Her real parentage and the circumstances of her birth were an impenetrable mystery and must always be so, no doubt, but her feeling for the Kellys was one of true affection and perfect loyalty. Not by word or deed had she hinted at the possession of knowledge which had come to her from other sources.

In the circumstances of the case she now allowed herself to imagine that a visit to her home people in their

native habit as they dwelt might help to cure Jack of his infatuation. An insight into things and men told her that Beaconsfield Villas must be whole worlds away from any sphere in which he had moved hitherto. Nor would he be likely to suspect, as she was shrewdly aware, that a creature so sophisticated as herself had risen from such humble beginnings. She had a ferocious pride of her own, but it was not of the kind that meanly denies its origin.

"Father," was her gay greeting to the astonished and still coatless Joe, "I've brought somebody to see you."

Jack, wearing a dustcoat and other appurtenances of the chauffeur's craft, had followed upon the heels of Princess Bedalia into the front parlor of Number Five. In response to the young man's bow, Kelly offered a rather dubious hand. As became a symbol of law and order and a member of the straitest sect of the Pharisees, he didn't feel inclined to encourage Mary in gallivanting up and down the land. Nor did he feel inclined to give countenance to any promiscuous young man she might bring to the house.

"Mr. Dinneford—my father, Police-Sergeant Kelly." It was a delightfully formal introduction, but rather wickedly contrived.

Jack was so taken aback that he felt as if a feather might have downed him. But even to the lynx eyes of Mary, which were covertly upon him, not a trace of his feelings was visible. He merely bowed a second time, perhaps a little more gravely than the first.

"Pleased to meet you, sir," said Sergeant Kelly, in a voice which showed pretty clearly that he was overstating the truth.

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Mary could not repress the rogue's laugh that sprang to her lips.

"Where's my old mumsie?" she gayly demanded, partly in the hope of concealing her wicked merriment.

"Upstairs with your Aunt Harriet."

"Aunt Harriet here!" The tone was full of surprise. And then the charming voice took a turn affectionately non-committal. "What luck! It seems an age since I saw her."

In spite of himself, Joe could not help being a little in awe of the girl. She was so remarkably striking that every time he saw her it became harder to keep up the pretense of blood relationship. She had developed into the finest young woman he had ever met. Her official father was very proud of her, the affection she inspired in him was true and real, but at the moment he was more than a little embarrassed by the impact of an immensely distinguished personality.

However, in spite of such beauty and charm, he was determined to do his duty by her; as became a father and a man he felt bound to admonish her.

"Since you took up with those people, none of us have been seeing much of you," he forced himself to say, in his most magisterial manner.

"Old story!"

"It's true and you know it." Joe declined on principle to be softened by her blandishments.

"Wicked old story!" She took him by the shoulders and shook him; and then she sighed as a mother might have done, and gazed into his solemn face. "Father," she said, "you are an old and great dear."

"Get along with you!" said Joe sternly, but in spite of himself he couldn't help laughing.

"I'll leave you and Mr. Dinneford to have a little crack while I take this to my mumsie." Brandishing an important-looking milliner's box, she left the room in a laughing search of Eliza.

As soon as Jack found himself alone with Mary's father a period of constraint ensued. It would have been wrong to deny that his reception had been the reverse of cordial. The sensitiveness of a lover, in duty bound to walk delicately, made no secret of that. Moreover, he was still so astonished at Mary's paternity that he felt quite at a loss. Nature had played an amazing trick. Somehow this serio-comic London copper in half-mufti, was going to make it very difficult to exercise the deference due to a prospective father-in-law.

An acute silence was terminated by Joe's "Won't you sit down, sir?"

Jack sat down; and then Mary's father, torn between stern disapproval and the humane feelings of a host, invited the young man solemnly to a glass of beer.

"Thank you very much," said Jack, with admirable gravity.

Murmuring "excuse me a minute," Joe went to draw the beer. Left alone the young man tried to arrange his thoughts; also he took further stock of his surroundings. He had yet to overcome a powerful feeling of surprise. It was hard to believe that Princess Bedalia, in the view of her *fiancé*, the very last word in modern young women, should have sprung from such a *milieu* as Number Five, Beaconsfield Villas. It was a facer. Yet somehow the chasm between Mary and her male

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parent seemed almost to enhance her value. She was so superb an original that she defied the laws of nature.

The young man was engulfed in an odd train of speculation when Mary's father returned with the beer. He poured out two glasses, gave one to the visitor, took one himself, and after a solemn "Good health, sir!" solemnly drank it.

Jack returned the "Good health!" and followed the rest of the ritual. And then feeling rather more his own man, he made an effort to come to business. But it was only possible to do that by means of a directness verging upon the indelicate.

"Sergeant Kelly," he said, "have you any objection to my marrying Mary?"

No doubt the form of the question was a little unwise. At least it exposed the young man to the prompt rejoinder:

"I know nothing whatever about you, sir."

"My name is Dinneford"—he could not refrain from laughing a little at the portentous gravity of a prospective father-in-law. "And I think I can claim that I have always passed as respectable."

"Glad to hear it, sir," said Joe, the light of a respectful humor breaking upon him. And then measuring the young man with the eye of professional experience. "May I ask your occupation?"

"No occupation."

"I don't like the sound o' that." Sergeant Kelly sagely shook his head.

"Perhaps it isn't quite so bad as it sounds," said the young man. "At present, you see, I am a kind of understudy to a sort of uncle I have. I am in training as

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you might say, so that one day I may follow in his footsteps."

"An actor," said the dubious Joe. He didn't mind actors personally, but impersonally he didn't quite hold with the stage.

"Not exactly," said the young man coolly, but with a smile. "And yet he is in his way. In fact, you might call him a prince of comedians."

"I'm sorry, sir." Sergeant Kelly measured each word carefully. "But I'm afraid that's only a very little in his favor."

"I'm sorry, too," said Jack. "My uncle is a duke, and the deuce of it is, I have to succeed him."

"A duke!" Sergeant Kelly's tone of rather pained surprise made it clear that such a romantic circumstance greatly altered the aspect of the case. It also implied that he was far from approving an ill-timed jest on a sacred subject. His brow knitted to a heavy frown. "Well, sir, I can only say that if such is the case you have no right to come a-courting our Mary."

"For why not, Sergeant Kelly?"

"You know why not, sir, as well as I do. She's a fine gal, although I say it who ought not, but that will not put her right with your friends. They will expect you to take a wife of your own sort."

"But that's rather my look-out, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir, it is," said Joe, with the air of a warrior, "but as you have asked me, there's my opinion. The aristocracy's the aristocracy, the middle-class is the middle-class, and the lower orders are the lower orders—there they are and you can't alter 'em. At least, that's my view of the matter."

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Jack forced a wry smile. Mary was a chip of the old block. Such an uncompromising statement seemed at any rate to explain the force of her conviction upon this vexed subject.

"Excuse the freedom, sir," said the solemn Joe, "but you young nobbs who keep on marrying out of your class are undermining the British Constitution. What's to become of law and order if you go on mixing things up in the way you are doing?"

The young man proceeded to do battle with the Philistine. But the weapons in his armory were none of the brightest with which to meet the crushing onset of the foe.

"It's no use, sir. As I say, the aristocracy's the aristocracy, the middle-class is the middle-class, and the lower orders are the lower orders—there they are and you can't alter 'em. You don't suppose I've reggerlated the traffic at Hyde Park Corner all these years not to know *that*."

In the presence of such a conviction, the best of Jack's arguments seemed vain, futile and shallow. Fate had charged Joseph Kelly with the solemn duty of maintaining the fabric of society, and in his purview, no argument however cunning, could set that fact aside.

IV

While these two were still at grips, each meeting the arguments of the other with a sense of growing impatience, the cause of the trouble intervened. Mary came into the room, leading her mother by the hand. With the face of a sphinx followed Harriet.

The blushing Eliza was adorned with a fine coat which had come in the milliner's box. Mary had laughingly insisted on her mother appearing in it, in spite of Eliza's firm conviction that "it was much too grand."

"My word, mother!" roared Joe, at the sight of her splendor. "I'm thinking I'll have to keep an eye on *you*."

The visitor was promptly introduced, first to the wearer of the coat, who offered a shy and embarrassed hand, and then to Aunt Harriet, who stood mute and pale in the background.

"Why—why, Mrs. Sanderson," said the young man, "fancy meeting you here!"

"You have met before?" said Mary, innocently.

"We meet very often."

"Really?"

"Why, yes. Mrs. Sanderson is Uncle Albert's right hand at Bridport House."

A pin might have been heard to fall in the silence that followed. The blood fled from Mary's cheeks; they grew as pale as those of her aunt. Even the knowledge that had recently come to her had not connected Jack with Bridport House. No attempt had been made to realize exactly who and what he was. It had been enough that he belonged to a world beyond her own. And now as this new and astonishing fact presented itself she saw the strongest possible justification for the attitude she had taken up.

As for Harriet, stern and unbending in the background, she was like an Antigone who abides the decree. Her fears were realized. The worst had happened. Fate

had played such a subtle and unworthy trick that the instinct uppermost was to resent it bitterly.

The feelings of the girl were very similar. But her strength of character and the independence of her position enabled her to take charge of a situation delicate and embarrassing. In a rather high-pitched voice, she began to talk generalities in order to bridge if possible the arid pauses which were always threatening to submerge the conversation. But at the back of her mind was a growing sense that secret forces are always at work in this strange world we inhabit—forces which have a peculiar malice of their own.

And yet, hopeless as the position had suddenly become for these five people, the fates had one more barb in their quiver. And it was of so odd a kind that it was as if the stars in their courses were bent upon seeing what mischief they could contrive in this particular matter. A sudden sharp rap from the knocker of the front door fell into the midst of the growing embarrassment. Joe, welcoming this diversion as relief to a tension that was almost intolerable, went at once to attend the cause of it.

"As I'm a living man," came a lusty voice from the threshold, "if it isn't old Joe Kelly."

The People's Candidate, rosetted, dauntless and triumphant, accompanied by the lady of his choice, stepped heroically into the small room. Twenty-three years had wrought a very remarkable change in a very remarkable man. In that time Dugald Maclean had bent all the powers of his genius to a task that Miss Harriet Sanderson had discreetly imposed upon the author of "Urban Love, a Trilogy." And now he came in, every inch

a victor, he had not looked to find his monitress. But there she was, pale, grim, yet somehow oddly distinguished in the background of a room curiously familiar. It was to her that his eyes leapt.

"Why, Miss Sanderson!" he said, with a conqueror's laugh, in which there was no trace of the tongue-tied youth of three and twenty years ago. Offering a conqueror's hand, he went forward to greet her.

Harriet yielded hers with a vivid blush. And as she did so, she was suddenly aware of two swordlike orbs piercing her right through.

"I didn't know Mrs. Sanderson was a friend of yours," said the honeyed voice of Lady Muriel.

"A very old friend," said Sir Dugald gayly.

At that moment, however, it was necessary for Lady Muriel to curb her curiosity. Since her exit from that room half-an-hour ago other people had gathered in it. She had hardly spoken when her astonished eyes fell upon Cousin Jack. Their recognition of each other was mutually incredulous. Yet there was really no reason why it should have been. It was known to the young man that Muriel had been refused permission to marry a politician already on the high road to place and power, and it was known to her that Jack had been going about with an actress.

"A family party," said Jack, as their eyes met. "Let me introduce Miss Lawrence—Lady Muriel Dinneford."

An exchange of aloof bows followed. And then, although very careful to seem to do nothing of the kind, each measured the other with an eye as hard and bright as a diamond. To neither was the result of this scrutiny exactly pleasant. It came upon Cousin Muriel with a

little shock of surprise that "the Chorus Girl" should look just as she did, and that she knew how to bear herself in a way that did not yield an inch to the enemy, yet at the same time scrupulously refrained from offering battle. Here was beauty of a very compelling kind, and in the hostile view of its present beholder something more valuable. The distinguished air, the look of breeding, went some way to excuse a deplorable infatuation. But as far as "the Chorus Girl" herself was concerned, a little over-sensitive as circumstances may have made her on the score of her own dignity, it was far from pleasant to detect in this authentic member of the family that power of conveying subtle insult, without speech or look, which belonged to the two others, presumably her sisters, whom she had met in the Park.

Somehow the girl felt a keen rage within. It may have been the world of unconscious arrogance behind that aloof nod, it may have been the implicit challenge in the lidded glance down the long straight nose. But whatever the cause, Mary suddenly felt a surge of resentment in her very bones.

In the meantime, the People's Candidate was playing his part to perfection. The flight of time had wrought wonders in this champion of Demos. He was no longer tongue-tied and awkward; even the roll of his "r's" was so diminished that Ardnaleuchan would hardly have known its child. Everything was in perfect harmony. After a few brief passages with Harriet, audaciously humorous, in which homage was paid to old times, he turned with a sportsman's eye to exchange a ready quip with Joe and Eliza.

Joe, in his heart, was scandalized. A Tory to the bone,

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in his view the social hierarchy was part of the cosmic order. It was unchanging, immutable. "Scotchie" was a charlatan, tongue in cheek; a mountebank of a fellow whom it was amazing that honest men, let alone high-born women, could not see through. Joe was determined to have no truck with him, but the People's Candidate with a bonhomie which the former colleague of the X Division was inclined to regard as mere brazenness, seemed quite determined not to take rebuffs from an old friend.

"You haven't a vote, Joe, I know," said Maclean, "but you are a man of influence here and I want you to speak for me with your pals."

Joe shook a solemn head.

"I don't believe in your principles," said he.

The voice, a growl of indignation, struck the ear of Lady Muriel a veritable blow. In spite of "the breadth" she was trying so hard to cultivate, the laws of her being demanded that these humble people should grovel. They were of another caste, another clay; somehow Joe's blunt skepticism gave her a sense of personal affront.

"You have not a vote, Mr. Kelly," she interposed, in a sharp tone. "Pray, why didn't you tell me? A canvasser's time is valuable."

"Your ladyship never asked the question."

"But you knew, surely, my object in coming?"

"I did," said Joe coolly, with a slightly humorous air. "And I thought your ladyship so dangerous that the best thing I could do was to get you barking up the wrong tree."

The answer delighted Maclean. He threw up his head

and laughed like a school boy. But in the midst of a mirth that his fiancée was quite incapable of sharing with him, Jack and Mary rose to go. They had been waiting to seize the first chance which offered in order to escape from a decidedly irksome family party.

V

As Mary and Jack took leave, the penetrating eye of the new Home Secretary regarded them. The two men had not met before, but they were known to each other by hearsay. Jack had heard little good of Maclean—Sir Dugald had heard even less good of Jack. A light of amused malice sprang to their eyes in the moment of recognition. But from those of the Scotsman it quickly passed. For almost at once his attention was caught by the affectionate intimacy of the good-bys bestowed upon Joe, Eliza, and Harriet by a girl of quite remarkable interest.

Was it possible? The live thought flashed through Sir Dugald's mind. In an instant it had leapt to the November evening of the year 1890. Immense quantities of water had flowed under the bridge since that far distant hour. And if this vivid, unforgettable girl was the creature he now suspected that she must be, here was one example the more of the romance of time, nature and circumstance.

As soon as Mary and Jack were away on what they called a joy-ride to Richmond, all Sir Dugald's doubts in the matter were laid at rest. At once there followed a few brief, but pitiless and bitter passages between Harriet Sanderson and Lady Muriel.

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"Tell me, Mrs. Sanderson," said the younger woman in a tone of ice, "is Miss Lawrence a connection of yours?"

"My niece, my lady," said Harriet, an odd tremor in her voice.

"A daughter, I presume, of your sister and her husband?"

"That is so, my lady." Harriet's tone was slowly deepening to that of her questioner.

"Of course, the matter will have to be mentioned at once to my father. And I'm afraid the consequences cannot fail to be serious. You must feel that it is very wrong to have connived at such a state of things."

Harriet's reply, brief but considered, made with a sudden flush of color and a lighted eye, was a cold denial. It was a short but painful scene, and its three witnesses would gladly have been spared it. Lady Muriel had lost a little of her poise. In spite of her "breadth" she was simply horrified by her discovery. She could not believe that Harriet spoke the truth. And the cunning, the duplicity, the chicane of a retainer who had held a privileged position for so many years filled her with an inward fury that was almost beyond control.

"One could not have believed it to be possible," she said, in a voice that trembled ominously. And having discharged that Parthian bolt, she withdrew with the People's Candidate in order to canvass the next house in the street.

VI

Such a departure left consternation in its train. After a moment of complete silence, Eliza burst into a sudden

flood of tears, Joe put on his tunic with the air of a tragedian, but Harriet remained immovable as a statue.

"This comes of the stage," wailed poor Eliza.

Joe felt the times themselves were to blame, at any rate they were sadly out of joint.

"I don't know what things are coming to," he said, flinging his slippers into a corner and putting on his boots. "Things are all upside down these days and no mistake."

Harriet blamed no one. She merely stood white and shaken, a picture of tragic unhappiness.

"Gal," said Joe, turning to her a Job's comforter, "one thing is sure. You are going to lose your place."

Harriet bit her lip, coldly disdaining a reply.

"As sure as eggs that'll be the upshot," proceeded Joe. "I'm sorry I let that jockey go without giving him a bit of my mind."

"He is not to blame," said Harriet tensely.

"Who is, then?"

"You and me, Joe," sobbed Eliza, "for letting her go on the stage."

"There was no stopping her—you know that well enough. As soon as she took up her dancing we lost all control of her. But we've got to be pretty sensible now. A nice tangle things are in, and they'll take a bit of straightening out."

Harriet shook a mournful head.

"What can people like ourselves possibly do?" she asked.

"I've a great mind," said Joe, "to step as far as Bridport House and have a few words with his Grace."

"That's merely preposterous," said Harriet decisively.

"The matter must be brought to his notice at once, any way," said Joe doggedly.

"You can count upon that," said Harriet grimly.

"But it'll be one side only. And there's the other, my gal."

"What other?" Harriet asked with a drawn smile.

"Her side. She is not going to be made a fool of by anyone if I can help it."

Said Harriet very gravely: "Joe, I sincerely hope you will not meddle in this. I am quite sure that any interference of ours will be most unwise."

But Joe shook the head of a warrior.

"There you're wrong. This is our affair and we've got to see it through."

"Far better let the matter alone."

"When we adopted that girl," said Joe, "we took a great responsibility on ourselves, and we've got to live up to it. In my opinion that young man means no good."

"You have no right to say that," said Harriet quickly.

"I've a right to say what I think. And you know as well as I do that the likes o' him don't condescend to the likes o' her with any good intention."

Harriet flushed darkly.

"I am quite sure that Mr. Dinneford would always behave like a gentleman," she said sternly.

"That is more than you know."

"You seem to forget that he is one of the Family."

Joe laughed rather sardonically. "I don't blame you for being so set up with your precious Family," he said. "It is only right that you should be—but I know what I know. Human nature's human nature."

Harriet shook her head. Not for a moment could she accept this point of view. Moreover, she strongly urged that there must not be interference of any kind with Bridport House.

"That's as may be," said Joe stoutly. "But you can take your oath that I mean to see justice done in the matter."

"You talk as if she was your own daughter," said Harriet, who was growing deeply annoyed.

"Ever since I gave her my name and my roof, I have looked on her as a gal of my own."

"Yes, that we have," chimed Eliza tearfully. "And I am sure that Joe is right to take the matter up."

Again Harriet dissented. In her view, and she did not hesitate to express it forcibly, it would be sheer folly for people like themselves to meddle in such a delicate affair.

"It seems to me," said Eliza bitterly, "that rather than go against Bridport House, you would ruin the girl."

The words struck home. Eliza had long looked up to her younger sister. The position she held was one of honor, but Harriet's exaggerated concern for an imposing machine of which she was no more than a very humble cog, somehow aroused Eliza's deepest feelings.

"It is a very wicked thing to say." And in the eyes of Harriet was an odd look.

"You set these grandees above everything in the world," Eliza taunted. "Like the Dad, you simply worship them."

A deadly pallor overspread Harriet's face. Her eyes grew grim with pain and anger. But a powerful

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nature, schooled to self-discipline, fought for control and was able to gain it.

"It's a futile discussion," she said suddenly, in a changed tone. And then she added with an earnestness strangely touching. "Joe, I implore you, not to take any step in the matter without first consulting me."

The solemn words seemed to gain finality from the fact that Harriet Sanderson then walked abruptly out of the house,

CHAPTER VI

PLOT AND COUNTERPLOT

I

THE Duke, in his morning-room, was reading a letter which had just come to him by post. As he folded it neatly and returned it to an envelope which bore the stamp of the south-eastern postal district, the light of humor played over an expressive face. And when, after much reflection, he took the letter again from its envelope and solemnly re-read it, the look deepened to the verge of the saturnine.

Still pondering what he plainly considered to be a priceless document, a succession of odd grimaces caused him to purse his lips and to frown perplexedly. At last he dropped his glasses and broke into a guffaw.

Lying back in his invalid's chair, still in the throes of an infrequent laughter, he was presently brought back to the plane of gravity by the unexpected arrival of Lady Wargrave upon the scene.

She entered the room with a gladiatorial air.

The face of his Grace underwent a sudden change at the sight of this unwelcome visitor.

Charlotte seated herself ponderously. And then having allowed a moment's pause for dramatic effect, she

said, marking her brother with an intent eye, "The plot thickens."

"Plot?" he said, warily.

"Do you wish me to believe that you have not heard the latest development?"

"Why speak in riddles, Charlotte?" He was trying to suppress a growing irritability.

Charlotte smiled frostily. "One should make allowances, no doubt, for natural simplicity. But even to the aloofness of philosophers there's a limit, my friend. You must know that there is only one subject in all our minds just now."

The Duke, a concentrated gaze upon Charlotte, did not allow himself to admit anything of the kind. For one thing they were lifelong adversaries. Charlotte was a meddlesome woman, an intriguer and a busybody in the sacred name of Family. They had tried many a fall with each other in the past, and although Providence in making Albert John the head of the house had given him an unfair advantage, he was often hard set by Charlotte's malice and persistency.

"Have you spoken to that young wretch?" Charlotte lost no time in coming boldly to the horses.

"I have not," was the sour reply.

"Is it quite wise, do you think, to let the grass grow under your feet?—particularly having regard to the fact that the person happens to be a niece of Mrs. Sander-son's." This was a very shrewd blow, whose manner of delivery had been most carefully considered beforehand. Indeed, so neatly was it planted now that his Grace got the shock of his life. The surprise was so painfully sharp that he found it hard to meet the foe

without flinching. He had to make a great effort to hold himself in hand. And Charlotte, a cold eye upon him, followed up in an extremely businesslike manner. She had a very strong hand to play and a true warrior, if ever there was one, she was set on wringing out of it the last ounce of advantage. There had come to her at last, after many a year of watching and waiting, an opportunity beyond her hopes and her prayers. '

"Last evening poor Sarah came to me in great distress," proceeded Charlotte. "Muriel, it appears, had been electioneering in the constituency of a certain person, and in the course of her wanderings up and down the suburbs, she found herself quite by chance at the house of Mrs. Sanderson's brother-in-law."

By this time his Grace had sufficiently recovered from the blow that had been dealt him to ask how Muriel had contrived to make that particular discovery.

It seemed that she had found Mrs. Sanderson there.

"The long arm of coincidence," opined his Grace with a wry smile. He opined further that the whole thing began to sound uncommonly like a novel.

"Sober reality, I assure you, Johnnie. And sober reality can beat any novel in the power of the human mind to invent, that's why it's so stupid to write them. Muriel entered the house by chance, Mrs. Sanderson came there, and presently, if you please, Master Jack arrived by motor with the young person. By the way, Muriel says she is very good looking."

"Quite a family party." His Grace achieved a light tone with difficulty. "But I incline to think, Charlotte, you a little overstate the facts."

"It is the story Muriel told Sarah."

"Well, I am very unwilling to believe that Mrs. Sanderson knew what was going on."

"Pray, why not?" He was raked by a goshawk's eye.

"She would have told me."

Somehow those lame, impotent words revealed a man badly hit. Charlotte saw that at once, and forthwith proceeded to turn the fact to pitiless advantage. A gust of coarse laughter swept the room.

"Johnnie, it's the first time I've read you a fool. Simple Simon! Do you think a woman who has learned to play her cards like that is the one to give away her hand?"

This was a second blow planted neatly on the vizor of his Grace. In spite of his armor of cynicism he could be seen to wince a little. And the silence which followed enabled the implacable foe to perceive that he was shaken worse than it seemed reasonable to expect him to be.

"Perhaps you'll now permit her to be sent away. A sordid intriguer. She must go at once."

In the trying moment which followed, the Duke, badlyhipped, fought valiantly to pull himself together. But somehow he only just managed to do so.

"You make a mistake, Charlotte," he said, with an effort that clearly hurt him. "She is not that kind of person. You always have made that mistake. She is a superior woman in every way. At least, I have always found her so. I can't imagine such a woman intriguing for anybody."

"Shows how little you know 'em, Johnnie." Another Gargantuan gust swept the room. "Every woman in-

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trigues unless she's a born fool, and this housekeeper nurse of yours is very far from being that—believe me."

For a brief, but uncomfortable moment the Duke thought the matter over with an air of curious perplexity. Then he said abruptly and with defiance:

"I must have further information."

"Sarah has the details. It would be well, no doubt, to have her views on the matter."

Whereupon Charlotte rose massively, crossed to the bell and rang it in order that a much tormented male should enjoy this further privilege.

II

The eldest daughter of the house, when she came on the scene, found the atmosphere decidedly electric. Her father was glaring with very ominous eyes; while it was clear from the look on the face of Aunt Charlotte that she was under the impression that she had downed him at last. No doubt she had, but if those eyes meant anything there was still a lot of fight in the stricken warrior.

Sarah herself was a long, thin, flat-chested person. Totally devoid of imagination, her horizon was so limited that outside the Family nothing or nobody mattered. And yet she was not in the least domesticated. In fact, she was not in the least anything. She was nobly and consistently null, without opinions or ideas, without humor, charm or amenity. Her mental outlook had somehow thrown back to the 1840's, yet with all her limitations, apart from which very little remained of

her, she was a thoroughly sound, exceedingly honest Christian gentlewoman of thirty-eight.

Sarah, it seemed, having heard Muriel's story, had taken counsel of the dowager. And at once realizing the extreme gravity of the whole affair, both ladies determined to make the most of a long-sought opportunity to give the housekeeper her quietus. Sarah herself, who was inclined to be embittered and vindictive on this particular point, fell in only too readily with Aunt Charlotte's desire to take full advantage of such a golden chance. Called upon now to divulge all that she knew, the eldest daughter re-told Muriel's remarkable story of her meeting with Mrs. Sanderson, Jack and the girl, in the course of political endeavors at Laxton. The story, amazing as it was, was undoubtedly authentic.

"Of course, father," was Sarah's conclusion, very pointedly expressed, "she will simply *have* to go. And the sooner the better, as no doubt you agree."

To Sarah's deep annoyance, however, her sire seemed very far from agreeing.

"There is no direct evidence of collusion," he said. "And knowing Mrs. Sanderson to be an old and tried servant, who has always had our welfare at heart, I am very unwilling to place such a construction upon what may be no more than a rather odd coincidence."

Sarah was too deeply angry to reply. But she looked on grimly while the ruthless Charlotte showily marshaled her forces. The quarrel was a very pretty one. Yet the Duke, now his back was to the wall, was able to take excellent care of himself. Moreover, he flatly declined to hear a worthy woman traduced until she had

had a chance of meeting charges so recklessly, and as it seemed, malevolently brought against her.

"From the way in which you speak of her," said the incensed Charlotte, "you appear to regard her as a person of importance."

"Charlotte, I regard her as thoroughly honest, trustworthy, competent—in fact a good woman in every way."

"You willfully blind yourself, Johnnie. This creature has thrown dust in your eyes. But it will be no more than you deserve if one day her niece is installed as mistress here. You will not live to see it, yet it would be no more than bare justice if you did."

"Pernicious nonsense," rejoined his Grace. "Perhaps in the circumstances it would be well to hear what Mrs. Sanderson has to say for herself."

"She is bound to lie."

Somehow the precision of the language stung his Grace.

"You are not entitled to say that," he flashed.

"It is the common sense of the situation and one has a perfect right to express it."

"Not here, Charlotte—not in this room before me. If I trust people implicitly—there are not many that I do—I trust them implicitly, and I can't allow even *privileged* people to speak of them in that way—at any rate, in my presence."

This explosion was so unlooked for that it took the ladies aback. In all the years they had fought him they had never seen him moved so deeply. A new Albert John had suddenly emerged. Never before had the head of the house allowed these enemies to catch a glimpse of such quixotic, such fantastic chivalry. Char-

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lotte was sourly amused, Sarah, amazed; but both ladies were deeply angry.

However, they had fully made up their minds that the housekeeper must go. Indeed, that had been already arranged at the after-dinner conference at Hill Street the previous evening. They were convinced that a woman whom they intensely disliked, whose peculiar position they greatly resented, was at last driven into a corner. The Duke's indecently bold defense of her had taken them by surprise, but it only made them the more determined to push their present advantage ruthlessly home.

III

Suddenly Sarah rose and pressed the bell. She demanded of the servant who answered it that Mrs. Sanderson should appear.

Harriet, already apprised of Lady Wargrave's arrival, came at once. She was quite prepared for a painful scene. Only too well had she reason to know the state of feeling in regard to herself. She had always been so able and discreet that she had enforced the outward respect of those whom she served so loyally. But she well knew that she was not liked by the ladies of the house, and that the special position she had come to hold owing to the decline of the Duke's health, was a *casus belli* between him and the members of his family. She had long been aware that in the opinion of the Dinneford ladies it was no part of a housekeeper's functions to act as a trained nurse to their invalid father.

Harriet had a natural awe of Lady Wargrave, which

she shared with all under that roof; for Lady Sarah she had the deep respect which she extended to every member of the august clan it had been her privilege to serve for so many years. In the devout eyes of Harriet Sanderson each unit of that clan was not as other men and women. In the matter of Bridport House and all that it stood for, she was more royalist than the king.

From the dark hour, a week ago now, in which the news had come by a side wind, that the fates by a stroke of perverse cruelty, as it seemed, had thrown Mary across the path of Mr. Dinneford, she had hardly known how to lay her head on her pillow. To her mind the whole thing was simply calamitous. It had thrown her into a state of profound unhappiness. She now came into the room looking worn and ill, yet fully prepared for short shift to be meted out to her by those whom she found assembled there.

The ladies looked for defiance, no doubt. And they may have looked for an undercurrent of malicious triumph. Yet if they expected either of these things their mistake was at once very clear. It was hard to find a trace of the successful intriguer in the haggard cheeks and somber eyes of the woman before them. But to minds such as theirs portents of this kind could not be expected to weigh in the scale against their pre-conceived ideas.

It was left to Lady Wargrave to fix the charge. And this she did with a blunt precision which was itself a form of insult. The icy tones were scrupulously polite, nothing was said which one in her position was not entitled to say in such circumstances, yet the whole

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effect was so deadly in its venom as to be absolutely pitiless.

At first Harriet was overwhelmed. The force of the attack was beyond anything she had looked for. Moreover, it seemed to fill the Duke, an unwilling auditor, with anger and pain. He moved uneasily in his chair, yet he was not able to check the cold torrent of quasi-insult by word of mouth, for none knew better than Lady Wargrave how to administer castigation without going outside the rules of the game.

Even when the shock of the first blows was past, Harriet could find no means of defending herself. She was a very proud woman. Her blamelessness in what she could only regard as a very odious matter was so clear to her own mind that it did not seem to call for re-statement. She, too, said nothing. But a hot flush came upon the thin cheek.

Lady Wargrave grew more and more incensed by a silence, the cause of which she completely mistook.

"You have been nearly thirty years here, Mrs. Sander-son, and you have been guilty of a wicked abuse of trust."

The painful pause which followed this final blow was broken at last by the Duke.

"You must forgive me, Charlotte, if I say that the facts of the case as they have been presented, hardly justify such a statement."

The tone was honey. And it was in such ironical contrast to Charlotte's own that nothing could have shown more clearly the wide gulf between their points of view or the envenomed strife of many years now coming to a head.

"They prove the charge to the hilt." The hawk's eyes of Charlotte contracted ominously.

"What charge?—if you don't mind stating it explicitly."

"Mrs. Sanderson has used her position here to make her niece known to the future head of this house, she has connived at their intimacy, she appears to have fostered it in every way."

"I don't think you are entitled to say that, Charlotte." The Duke spoke slowly and pointedly, and then he turned to Harriet with an air of such delicate politeness that it added fuel to the flame which was withering her traducers. "If it is not asking too much, Mrs. Sanderson," he said, with a smile of grave kindness, "I should personally be very grateful if you would be wicked enough to defend yourself. Let me say at once that I am far from accepting the construction Lady Wargrave has placed on the matter. But her zeal for a time-honored institution is so great that if her judgment is outrun, it seems only kind to forgive her."

Such oblique but resounding blows in the scone of Charlotte filled her with a fury hard to hold in check.

"What defense is possible?" Her voice was like a crane. "The facts are there to look at. Mrs. Sanderson's niece has extracted a promise of marriage."

The Duke turned to Harriet rather anxiously.

"I sincerely hope Lady Wargrave has been misinformed," he said.

Harriet flushed.

"I only know"—speech for her had become almost intolerably difficult—"that Mr. Dinneford has asked my brother-in-law's consent to his marrying her."

The Duke may have been deeply annoyed, but not a line of his face betrayed him.

"Who is your brother-in-law, Mrs. Sanderson?"

Harriet told him.

"A very honest man"—the Duke checked a laugh—"I have been honored by a letter from him this morning."

Even the lacerated Harriet could not forbear to smile.

"I am sure," said she, "he will not let Mary marry Mr. Dinneford if he can help it."

"Why not?" sharply interposed Lady Wargrave.

"Why not, Charlotte?" Her brother took upon himself to answer the question. "Because Sergeant Kelly is a very sensible and enlightened man who evidently tries to see things in their right relation."

"Fiddle-de-dee!" said Charlotte, with the bluntness for which she was famous. "Depend upon it, he knows as well as anybody on which side his bread is buttered."

Her brother shook his head. "I think," he said, "if you had had the privilege of reading Sergeant Kelly's letter you would be agreeably surprised. At any rate, he seems quite to share your view of the sacredness of the social fabric."

"Let us look at the facts," said Charlotte. "This marriage has to be prevented at all costs. And I hope it is not too much to ask Mrs. Sanderson that she will give us any assistance which may lie in her power."

The look upon Lady Wargrave's face, as she made the request, clearly implied that help from such a quarter must, in the nature of things, be negligible. But in spite of the covert insult in the tone and manner of the dowager, Harriet replied very simply that there was nothing she would leave undone to prevent such a catastrophe.

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"I am quite sure, Mrs. Sanderson, we can count upon that," said the Duke, in a tone which softened considerably the humiliating silence with which the promise had been received.

"To begin with," said the Duke, turning to Harriet, "I shall ask your brother-in-law to come and see me. Evidently he is one of these sensible, straightforward men who can be trusted to take a large view of things."

The face of Lady Wargrave expressed less optimism.

"There is one question I would like to put to Mrs. Sanderson," she suddenly interposed. It seemed that she had reserved for a final attack the weapon on which she counted most. "Be good enough to tell me this." The ruthless eye was fixed on Harriet. "How long, Mrs. Sanderson, have you known of Mr. Dinneford's intimacy with your niece?"

There was a slight but painful pause, and it was broken by a rather faltering reply.

"It is just a week since I first heard of it, my lady."

"Just a week! And in the whole of that time you have not thought well to mention the matter?"

The tone cut like a knife. And the stab it dealt was so deep that Harriet was unable to answer the question which propelled it.

"*Why didn't* you mention it, Mrs. Sanderson?"

The blood fled suddenly from Harriet's cheek. She grew nervous and confused.

"Please answer the question." There was now a ring of triumph in the pitiless tone.

"I wished to spare his Grace unpleasantness," stammered Harriet.

"Very thoughtful of you, Mrs. Sanderson," said Lady

Wargrave, bitinglly. "No doubt his Grace appreciates your regard for his feelings. But even if that was the motive, surely it was your duty to report the matter to Lady Sarah as soon as it came to your knowledge."

The hesitation of Harriet grew exceedingly painful to witness.

"Yes," she said at last. Tears suddenly sprang to her eyes. "I begin to see now that it *was* my duty. I wish very much that I *had* mentioned the matter to Lady Sarah."

Both ladies were so fully set on the overthrow of this serpent that the air of touching, exquisite simpleness went for nothing. But in any case they would have been too obtuse to notice it.

"We all wish that." Lady Wargrave pursued her advantage pitilessly. "And I am sure I speak for his Grace as well as for the rest of us." She trained a look of malicious triumph upon the perplexed and frowning face of her brother.

As became a consummate tactician who now had the affair well in hand, Charlotte gave the Duke a moment to intervene if he felt inclined to do so. But she well knew, a kind of instinct told her, that the attack had succeeded completely. The housekeeper made such a feeble attempt to parry it, that for the time being her champion was dumb. Nor was this surprising. In the opinion of both ladies the sinister charge of collusion had now been proved to the hilt.

Lady Wargrave having given her brother due opportunity for a further defense of Mrs. Sanderson, which he had quite failed to grasp, proceeded coldly and at leisure to administer the *coup de grâce*.

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"I am afraid, Mrs. Sanderson," she said, "that in these circumstances only one course is open to you now."

She was too adroit, however, to state exactly what that cause was. She was content merely to suggest it. But Harriet did not need to be told what the particular alternative was that her ladyship had in mind.

"You wish me to resign my position," she said, in a low calm voice. She turned with tears in her eyes to the eldest daughter of the house. "I beg leave to give a month's notice from today, my lady. If you would like me to go sooner, I will do so at any time you wish."

The words and manner showed a consideration wholly lacking in the measure meted out to herself. There was so little of pride or of wounded dignity that the tears were running in a stream down the pale cheeks. Uppermost in Harriet Sanderson was still a feeling of profound veneration for those to whom she had dedicated the best years of her life.

IV

The ladies of the Family had won the day. Mrs. Sanderson was going. It was an occasion for rejoicing. She had intrigued disgracefully; moreover, it had long felt that this clever, unscrupulous, plausible woman had gained a dangerous ascendancy over the head of the house. But Aunt Charlotte, it seemed, with the tactical skill for which she was famous, had driven her into a corner and had forced her to surrender.

In the opinion of Sarah, Mrs. Sanderson had behaved very well. It was, of course, impossible to trust

that sort of person; but to give the woman her due, she had appeared to feel her position acutely; she had promised, moreover, to undo as far as in her lay the mischief she had caused. The ladies saw no inconsistency in that. They had formed a low opinion of Mrs. Sanderson—for what reason they didn't quite know—but now that she had received her *congée* and they were to have their own way at last there would be no harm in taking up a magnanimous attitude towards her.

As far as it went this was well enough, but a serious and solemn task had been imposed upon various people by the circumstances of the case. It now seemed of vital importance to those concerned that Jack should become engaged to Marjorie without further delay. With that end in view the ladies of the Family were now working like beavers. But all they had done so far had not been enough. In vain had the lure been laid in sight of the bird. In vain had they used the arts and the subtleties of their sex. For several weeks now Jack and Marjorie had been thrown together on every conceivable pretext, yet the only result had been that the future head of Bridport House had re-affirmed a fixed intention of taking a wife from the stage.

Three days after Lady Wargrave had gained her signal triumph over Mrs. Sanderson, the Duke was at home to an odd visitor. In obedience to the written request of his Grace's private secretary, Sergeant Kelly presented himself about noon at Bridport House.

Fortunately, Joe had been able to arrange for a day off for the purpose. Thus the dignity of man, also the dignity of the Metropolitan Force, were upheld by impressive mufti. He had discarded uniform for his best

Sunday cutaway, old and rather shining it was true, but black and braided, with every crease removed by Eliza's iron; a pair of light gray trousers, superbly checked; a white choker tie and a horse-shoe pin; while to crown all, a massive gold albert, a recent gift from Mary, was slung across a noble expanse of broadcloth waistcoat.

"Good morning, Sergeant Kelly," said a musical voice, as soon as the visitor was announced. The Duke in the depths of his invalid chair looked at him from under the brows of a satyr. "Excuse my rising. I'm a bit below the weather, as you see."

Joe, secretly prepared for anything in the matter of his reception, was impressed most favorably by such a greeting. Somehow the note of cordiality was so exactly that of one man of the world to another, that Joe was conscious of a subtle feeling of flattery. He was invited to sit, and he sat on the extreme verge of a Sheraton masterpiece, pensively twisting between his hands a brand-new bowler hat purchased that morning en route to Bridport House.

"Sergeant Kelly," said the Duke, speaking with a directness that Joe admired, "I liked your letter. It was that of a sensible man."

"Good of your Grace to say so," said Joe, a nice mingling of dignity and deference.

"I agree with you that the matter is extremely vexatious."

Joe took a long breath. "It's haggeravating, sir," said he.

"Quite so," said his Grace, with a whimsical smile. "But as a matter of curiosity, may I ask what had led you to that conclusion?"

"Just this, sir." Joe laid the new bowler hat on the carpet, squared his shoulders and fixed the Duke with his eye. "The aristocracy's the aristocracy, the middle-class is the middle-class, and the lower h'orders are the lower h'orders—there they are and you can't alter 'em. Leastways that was the opinion of the Marquis."

"I'm not sure that I know your friend," said the Duke with charming urbanity, "but I'm convinced his views are sound. If I read your letter aright, you are as much opposed to the suggested alliance between your daughter and my kinsman as I am myself."

"That is so, your Grace. It simply won't do."

"I quite agree," said the Duke, "but from your point of view—why won't it? I ask merely for information."

"Why won't it, sir?" said Joe, surprisedly. "Don't I say the aristocracy's the aristocracy?"

"In other words you disapprove of them on principle?"

"No, sir, it's because I respect 'em so highly," said Joe, with a simple largeness that bore no trace of the sycophant. "I've not reggerlated the traffic at Hyde Park Corner all these years without learning that it won't do to keep on mixing things up in the way we're doing at present. Things are in a state of flux, as you might say."

"Profoundly true," said the Duke, with a fine appearance of gravity. "And I have asked you to come here, Sergeant Kelly, to advise me in a very delicate matter. In the first place, I assume that you have withheld your consent to this ridiculous marriage."

"That is so, your Grace. But the young parties are that headstrong they may not respect their elders. I told the young gentleman what my feeling was, and I

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told the girl, but I'm sorry to say they laughed at me. Yes, sir, society is in a state of flux and no mistake."

"Well, Sergeant Kelly, what's to be done?"

"I should like your Grace to speak a word to the parties. Seemingly they take no notice of me. But perhaps they might of you, sir."

The Duke smiled and shook his head.

"Well, sir, they only laugh at me," said Joe. "But with you it would be different." And then with admirable directness: "Why not see the girl and give her your views in the matter? She's very sensible and she's been well brought up."

The Duke looked at his visitor steadily. If his Grace was in search of *arrière pensée*, he failed to find a sign of it in that transparently honest countenance.

"A bold suggestion," he said, with a smile. "But I don't know that I have any particular aptitude for handling headstrong young women."

Joe promptly rebutted the ducal modesty. "Your words would carry weight, sir. She's a girl who knows what's what, I give you my word."

The Duke could hardly keep from laughing outright at the sublime seriousness of this old bobby. But at the same time curiosity stirred him. What sort of a girl was this who owned such a genial grotesque of a father? It would impinge on the domain of comic opera to instal such a being as the future châtelaine of Bridport House. Still, as his visitor shrewdly said, society was in a state of flux.

"My own belief is," said Joe, "that she's the best girl in England, and if your Grace would set your point of

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view before her as you have set it before me, I'm thinking she'd do her best to help us."

The Duke was impressed by such candor, such openness, such simplicity. After all, there was just a chance that things might take a more hopeful turn.

"She's not one to go where she's not wanted, sir," said Joe. "And my belief is that if you have a little talk with her and let her know how you feel about it, you may be spared a deal o' trouble."

"You really think that?" said the Duke with a sigh of relief.

"I do, sir. Leastways, if you ain't, Joseph Kelly will be disappointed."

Such disinterestedness was not exactly flattering, yet the Duke was touched by it. Indeed, Sergeant Kelly's sturdy common sense was so reassuring that he was invited to have a cigar. At the request of his host, he pressed the bell, one long and one short, and in the process of time a servant appeared with a box of Coronas. Joe chose one, smelt it, placed it to his ear and then put it sedately in his pocket.

"I'll not smoke it now, sir," he said urbanely. "I'll keep it until I can really enjoy it."

He was graciously invited to take several. With an air of polite deprecation he helped himself to three more. Then he realized that the time had come to withdraw.

The parting was one of mutual esteem. If the girl would consent to pay a visit to Bridport House, the Duke would see her gladly. But again his Grace affirmed that he was not an optimist. Society *was* in a state of flux, he quite agreed, democracy was knocking at the gate and none knew the next turn in the game. Still the

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Duke was not unmindful of Sergeant Kelly's remarkable disinterestedness, and took a cordial leave of him, fully prepared to follow his advice in this affair of thorns.

As soon as the door had closed upon the dignified form of Sergeant Kelly, the Duke lay back in his chair fighting a storm of laughter. Cursed with a sense of humor, at all times a great handicap for such a one as himself, its expression had seldom been less opportune or more uncomfortable. For there was really nothing to laugh at in a matter of this kind. The thing was too grimly serious.

Still, for the moment, this amateur of the human comedy was the victim of a divided mind. He wanted to laugh until he ached over this solemn policeman upholding the fabric of society.

"By gad, he's right," Albert John ruminated, as he dipped gout-ridden fingers in his ravished cigar box. "Things *are* in a state of flux." He cut off the end of a cigar. "My own view is that this monstrous bluff which these poor fools have allowed some of us to put up since the Conquest, more or less, will mighty soon be about our ears. However,"—Albert John placed the cigar between his lips—"it hardly does to say so."

For a time this was the sum of his reflections. Then he pressed the bell at his elbow and the servant reappeared.

"Ask Mr. Twalmley to be good enough to telephone to Mr. Dinneford. I wish to see him at once."

CHAPTER VII

A TRAGIC COIL

I

MARY, breakfasting late and at leisure, before her ride at eleven, had propped the *Morning Post* against the coffee-pot. Milly was arranging roses in a blue bowl.

"I'm miserable!" Mary suddenly proclaimed. She had let her eyes stray to the column devoted to marriage and the giving in marriage, and at last she had flung the paper away from her.

"Get on with your breakfast," said the practical Milly. "I've really no patience with you."

Mary rose from the table with big trouble in her face.

"You're a gaby," said Milly, scornfully. "If everybody was like you there'd be no carrying on the world at all. You're absurd. Mother is quite annoyed with you, and so am I."

"I'm simply wretched." The tone was very far from that of the fine resolute creature whom Milly adored.

The truth was Mary had been following a policy of drift and it was beginning to tell upon her. Nearly a week had gone since the visit to Laxton had disclosed a state of things which had trebly confounded confusion. Besides, that ill-timed pilgrimage had given duty a sharper

point, a keener edge, but as yet she had not gathered the force of will to meet the hard logic of the matter squarely.

In spite of a growing resolve to make an end of a situation that all at once had become intolerable, she had weakly consented to ride that morning with Jack as usual. So far he had proved the stronger, no doubt because two factors of supreme importance were on his side. One was the promise into which very incautiously she had let herself be lured, to which he had ruthlessly held her, the other the simple fact that she was deeply in love with him. It had been very perilous to temporize, yet having been weak enough to do so, each passing day tightened her bonds. The little scheme had failed. Laxton had caused not the slightest change in his attitude; he was not the kind of man to be influenced by things of that kind; only a simpleton like herself would expect him to be! No, the plain truth was he was set more than ever on not giving her up, and it was going to be a desperate business to compel him. To make matters worse his attraction for her was great. There was a force, a quality about him which she didn't know how to resist. When they were apart she made resolves which when they were together she found herself unable to keep. The truth was, the cry of nature was too strong.

Milly looked up from her roses to study a picture of distraction.

"You odd creature." A toss of a sagacious head.

The charge was admitted frankly, freely, and fully.

"I don't understand you in the least." A wrinkling of a pert nose.

"I don't understand myself."

Milly looked at her wonderingly. "I really don't. You are quite beyond me. If you were actually afraid of these people, which I don't for a moment think you are, one might begin to see what's at the back of your absurd mind."

"Why don't you think I'm afraid of them?" Mary in spite of herself was a little amused by the down-rightness.

The question brought her right up against an eye of very honest admiration.

"Because, Miss Lawrence, it simply isn't in you to be afraid of anybody."

Princess Bedalia shook a rueful head. "You say that because you don't know all. I'm in a mortal funk of Bridport House."

"That I won't believe," said the robust Milly. "And if a fit of high-falutin' sentiment, for which you'll get not an ounce of credit, causes you to throw away your happiness, and turn your life into a sob-story, neither my mother nor I will ever forgive you, so there!"

"You seem to forget that I am the housekeeper's niece."

"As though it mattered." The pert nose twitched furiously. "As though it matters a row of little apples. You are yourself—your big and splendid self. Any man is lucky to get you."

But the large, long-lashed eyes were full of pain. "We look at things so differently. I can't explain what I mean or what I feel, but I want to see the whole thing, if I can, as others see it."

"We are the others—mother and I," said Milly,

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stoutly. "But as we are not titled snobs with Bridport House stamped on our notepaper, I suppose we don't count."

"That's not fair." A curious look came into Mary's face, which Milly had noticed before and, for a reason she couldn't explain, somehow resented. "They have their point of view and it's right that they should have. Without it they wouldn't be what they are, would they?"

"You speak as if they were better than other people."

"Why, of course."

"I shall begin to think you are as bad as they are," Milly burst out impatiently. "You are the oddest creature. I can understand your not going where you are not wanted, but that's no reason why you should fight for the other side."

"I want them to have fair play."

"It's more than they mean you to have, any way."

"One oughtn't to say that." The tone had a quaint sternness, charming to the ear, yet with a great power of affront for the soul of Milly.

"Miss Lawrence," said that democrat, "you annoy me. If you go on like this before mother she'll shake you. The trouble with you"—a rather fierce recourse to a cigarette—"is that you are a bit of a prig. You must admit that you are a bit of a prig, aren't you now?"

"More than a bit of one," sighed Mary. And then the light of humor broke over her perplexity. In the eyes of Milly this was her great saving clause; and in spite of an ever-deepening annoyance with her friend for the hay she was making of such amazingly brilliant prospects, she could not help laughing at the comic look of her now.

"You are much too clever to take things so seriously," said Milly. "You are not the least bit of a prig in anything else, and that's why you made me so angry. Be sensible and follow your luck. Jack should know far better than you. Besides, if you didn't mean to keep your word, why did you give it?"

This was a facer, as the candid Milly intended it to be. "Because I was a fool." At the moment that seemed the only possible answer.

II

The argument had not gone farther when a rather strident "coo-ee" ascending from the pavement below found its way through the open window.

"Diana, you are wanted." The impulsive Milly ran on to the little balcony to wave a hand of welcome to a young man in the street.

It was the intention, however, of the young man in the street, as soon as he could find someone to look after his horses, to come up and have a talk with Mary. To the quick-witted person to whom he made known that resolve, he seemed much graver than usual. It hardly required any special clairvoyance on the part of Milly to realize that something was in the wind.

Three minutes later, Jack had found his way up and Milly had effaced herself discreetly. This morning that warrior was not quite the serenely humorous self whom his friends found so engaging. Recent events had annoyed him, disquieted him, upset him generally, and the previous afternoon they had culminated in a long and unsatisfactory interview at Bridport House.

Those skilled in the signs might have told, from the young man's manner, that he had cast himself for a big thinking part. This morning he was "all out" for diplomacy. He would like Mary to know that his back was to the wall, and that he must be able to count on her implicitly in the stern fight ahead; but the crux of the problem was, and for that reason he felt such a great need of cunning, if he let her know the full force and depth of the opposition the effect upon her might be the reverse of what he intended. Even apart from the stab to her pride, she was quite likely to make it a pretext for further quixotism. Therefore, Mr. John Dinneford had decided to walk very delicately indeed this morning.

His Grace, it appeared, had asked to see the lady in the case. Jack, however, scenting peril in the request, had by no means consented lightly to that. Diplomacy, assuming a very large D, had promptly assured him that his kinsman and fiancée were far too much birds of a feather; their method of looking at large issues was ominously alike. Mary had developed what Jack called "the Aunt Sanderson viewpoint" to an alarming degree. Aunt Sanderson, no doubt, had acquired it in the first place from the fountain head; its authenticity therefore made it the more perilous.

"Uncle Albert sends his compliments and hopes you'll be kind enough to go and see him." The statement was made so casually that it was felt to be a masterpiece of the non-committal. He would defy anyone to tell from his tone how he had fought the old wretch, how he had tried to outwit him, how he had done his damndest to short-circuit a most mischievous resolve.

"Now." The diplomatist took her boldly by a very

fine pair of shoulders, and so made a violent end of the pause which had followed the important announcement. "Whatever you do, be careful not to give away the whole position. There's a cunning old fox to deal with, and if he finds the weak spot, we're done."

"You mean he thinks as I do?"

"I don't say he does exactly, but, of course, he may. When you come to Bridport House, you are up against all sorts of crassness."

"Or common sense, whichever you choose to call it," said the troubled Mary.

"Don't you go playing for them." He shook the fine shoulders in a masterful colonial manner. "If you do, I'll never forgive you. Bridport House can be trusted to take very good care of itself. We've got to keep our own end going. If we have really made up our minds to get married, no one has a right to prevent us, and it's up to you to let his Grace know that."

Again came the look of trouble. "But suppose I don't happen to think so?"

"I think so for you. In fact, I think it so strongly that I intend to answer for both."

She could not help secretly admiring this cool audacity. At any rate, it was the speech of a man who knew his own mind, and in spite of herself it pleased her.

"Now, remember." Once more the over-bold wooer resorted to physical violence: "You simply can't afford to enjoy the luxury of your fine feelings in this scene of the comedy. As I say, he's a cunning old fox and he'll play on them for all he's worth."

"But why should he?"

"Because he knows you are Mrs. Sanderson's niece."

"In his opinion that would make one the less likely to have them, wouldn't it?" She tried very hard to keep so much as a suspicion of bitterness out of her tone, yet somehow it seemed almost impossible to do that.

"He's not exactly a fool. Nobody knows better than he that your Aunt Sanderson is more royalist than the king. And my view is that he and she have laid their heads together in order to work upon your scruples."

"Pray, why shouldn't they? Isn't it right that they should?"

"There you go!" he said sternly. "Now, look here." In the intensity of the moment his face was almost touching hers. "I'm next in at Bridport House, so this is my own private funeral. But I just want to say this. A man can't go knocking about the world in the way I have done without getting through to certain things. And as soon as that happens one no longer sees Bridport House at the angle at which it sees itself. White marble and precedence were all very well in the days of Queen Victoria, but they won't build airships, you know."

"I never heard of a duchess building airships."

"It's the duke who is going to do the building. The particular hobo I'm figuring on has got to take a hand in all sorts of stunts at this moment of the world's progress which will make his distinguished forbears turn in their graves, no doubt. It seems to me he's got to do a single on the big time, as they say in vaudeville, and the finest girl in the western hemisphere must keep him up to his job."

"Some talk," said Mary, with a smile rather drawn and constrained.

"You see"—the force of his candor amused her con-

siderably—"I've drawn a big prize in the lottery, and if I let myself be robbed of it by other people's tomfool tricks, I'm a guy, a dead-beat, an out and out dud."

"But don't you see," she urged, laughing a little, although suffering bitterly, "how cruel it would be for them, poor souls? We *must* think of them a little."

"Why should they come in at all?"

"I really think they ought, poor dears. After all, they stand for something." She recalled their former talk on this vexed subject.

"What do they stand for?—that's the point. They are an inbred lot, a mass of conceit and silly prejudice. I'm sorry to give them away like this, but, after all, they are only very distant relations to whom I owe nothing, and they have a trick of annoying me unspeakably."

"I won't have you say such things." The stern line of a truly adorable mouth was a delight, a challenge. "You are one of them, whether you want to be or whether you don't, and it's your duty to stand by them. *Noblesse oblige*, you know."

"And that means a scrupulous respect for the feelings of other people, if it means anything. No, let us see things as they are and come down to bedrock." And as the Tenderfoot spoke after this manner, he took a hand of hers in each of his in a fashion at once whimsical, delicate, and loverlike. Somehow he had the power to put an enchantment upon her. "You've got to marry me whatever happens."

"Oh, don't ask me to do that." Black trouble was now in her eyes. "Don't ask me to go where I'm not wanted."

"Certainly you shan't. We can do without Bridport

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House, and if they can do without us, by all means let 'em."

"But they are in a cleft stick, aren't they? If you insist, they will simply have to climb down, and that's why it would be cruel to make them. Don't be too hard upon them—*please!*" A sudden change of voice, rich and surprising, held him like magic. "Somehow they don't quite seem to deserve it. They have their points. And they are really rather big and fine if you see them as I do."

"They are crass, conceited, narrow, ossified. They think the world was made for 'em, instead of thinking they were made for the world. It's time they had a lesson. And you and I have got to teach 'em." He took her wrists and drew her to him. "We've got to larn 'em to be toads—you and me."

"On these grounds you command me!" The flash of glorious eyes was a direct challenge.

"No, on these—you darling." And he took her in his arms and held her in a grip of iron.

III

"Please, please!"

Reluctantly he let her go—provisionally and on sufferance.

But there was something in her face that looked like fear. The observant lover saw it at once, and the invincible lover tried to dispel it.

"Why take it tragically?" he said. "It's a thing to laugh at, really."

She shook a solemn head. "We *must* think of them—you must at any rate. You are all they have, and you

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are bound to play for them as well as you know how—aren't you, my dear?" The soft fall of her voice laid a siren's spell upon him. His eyes glowed as he looked at her.

"No, I don't see it in that way," he said. "Somehow I can't. It's my colonial outlook, I daresay—anyhow there it is—simply us two. The bedrock of the matter is you and me? And when you get down to that, other people don't come in, do they?"

Again she shook a head rather woeful in its defiance. "Poor Aunt Harriet came to me yesterday. I wish you could have seen her. This means the end of the world for her. She almost went down on her knees to implore me not to marry you."

The Tenderfoot snorted with impatience. "That's where this old one-horse island gets me all the time. Things are all wrong here. They're positively medieval."

"You forget"—the tone of the voice was stern dissent—"she's been thirty years a servant in the Family."

"That should make her all the prouder to see her niece married to the head of it." He was determined to stand his ground.

"Yes, but she understands what it means to them. She has thought herself into their skins; she lives and moves and has her being in Bridport House. Dear soul, it makes me weep to think of her! She almost forced me to give you up."

"You can't do that, not on grounds of that kind."

"Why can't I?"

"Because I won't let you." She was bound to admire this masculine decision. "Your Aunt Sanderson is a

woman of fine character and Uncle Albert has a great regard for her, but why let ourselves be sidetracked by prejudice? You see this is the call of the blood, and—under Providence!—it means the grafting of a very valuable new strain upon a pretty effete one. I mean no disrespect to Bridport House, but look what the system of intermarriage has done for it. From all one hears poor Lyme was better out of the world than in it. And that parcel of stupid women! And, of course, I should never have been here at all if another couple of consumptive cousins hadn't suddenly decided to hand in their checks. So much for the feudal system, so much for inbreeding and marrying to order. No, it won't do!"

In spite of her own deep conviction, she could not hope to shake such force and such sincerity. She was bound to admit the strength of his case. But the power of his argument left her in a miserable dilemma, from which there seemed but one means of escape. There must be no half-measures.

"Let us be wise and make an end now," she said very softly.

"It's not playing fair if you do," was the ruthless answer. "Besides, as I say, Uncle Albert wants to see you."

"I am quite sure it would be far better to end it all now."

"You must go and see Uncle Albert before we decide upon anything," he said determinedly.

"I don't mind doing that, if really he wishes it." There was a queer little note of reverence in her tone, which the Tenderfoot, having intelligently anticipated, was inclined to resent as soon as he heard it. "I don't

know why he should trouble himself with me, but I'll go as he asks me to. But whatever happens we can't possibly get married, unless——"

"Unless what?" he demanded sternly.

"Unless the head of the house gives a full and free consent, and of course he'll never do that."

"It remains to be seen, doesn't it?"

"Oh, no, it's all so clear. Poor Aunt Harriet has made me realize that. I never saw anyone so upset as she was yesterday; she nearly broke down, poor dear. She has made me see that there is so much at stake for them all, that it simply becomes one's duty not to go on."

"Rubbish! Rubbish! Rubbish!" The Tenderfoot suddenly became tempestuous. "Mere parochialism, I assure you. I've been back six months, and every day it strikes me more and more what a lot we've got to learn. Our so-called social fabric is mainly bunkum. Half the prejudice in these islands is a mere cloak for damnable incompetence. Forgive my saying just what is in my mind, but this flunkeyism of ours—try to keep the daggers out of your eyes, my charmer!—fairly gets one all the time. In one form or another one's always up against it."

"It isn't flunkeyism at all." The air of outrage was nothing less than adorable.

"Let me finish——"

"Under protest!" Her face was aglow with the light of battle.

"It's perfectly absurd to take a mere pompous stunt like Bridport House at its own valuation."

"I won't have you vulgar—I won't allow you to be vulgar!"

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"Be it so, Miss Prim—but I don't apologize. One's uncles, cousins, aunts, they are all alike, whether they are yours or mine. They simply grovel before material greatness—the greatness that comes of money—that begins and ends with money."

"Don't be rude, sir!" The stamp of a particularly smart riding boot, and a flash of angry eyes were as barbs to this fiat.

"They are all so set on things that don't matter a bit, that they lose sight altogether of the one thing that is really important."

"Pray, what is that?" The eyes held now a lurking, troubled smile; for him at that moment, their fascination verged upon the tragic.

Suddenly both the slender wrists were seized by this forcible thinker. "Why the time spirit, you charmer. And that just asks one simple question. Do you love me—or do you not?"

IV

She tried to keep her eyes from his.

"You can't hide the truth," he cried triumphantly. "And if you think I'm going to lose you for the sake of some stupid piece of prejudice you don't know what it means to live five years in God's own country."

She seemed to shrink into herself. "Don't you see the impossibility of the whole thing?" she gasped.

"Frankly, I don't, or I wouldn't be such a cad as to badger you. If you marry me an effete strain is going to be your debtor. Just look at them—poor devils! Look at the two who died untimely. That's the feudal

system of marriage working to a logical conclusion. And if I put it squarely to my kinsman, Albert John, who is by no means a fool, he'd be the first to admit it. No, it doesn't matter what your arguments are, if you override the call of the blood sooner or later there's bound to be big trouble."

The conviction of the tone, the urgency of the manner were indeed hard to meet. From the only point of view that really mattered it was impossible to gainsay him, and she was far too intelligent to try. Suddenly she broke away from him and in a wretched state of indecision and unhappiness flung herself into a chair.

"The whole thing's as clear as daylight." Pitilessly he followed up the advantage he had won. "There's really no need to state it. And once more, to come down to bedrock, far better to make an end of Bridport House and all that it stands for—just what it does stand for I have not been able to make out—than that it should perpetuate a race of inbred incompetents who are merely a fixed charge on the community."

"Oh, you don't see—you don't see!" The words were rather feeble, and rather wild, but just then they were all she could offer. Yet in spite of herself, and in spite of the half-promise the intensely unhappy Aunt Harriet had wrung from her on the previous afternoon, the clear-cut determination of this young man, his force and his breadth, his absolute conviction were beginning to tell heavily.

"You are going to Bridport House to have a word with my kinsman. And if you're true blue—and I know you are that—you will make him see honest daylight. And it ought to be easy, because he has only to look

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at you—the finest thing up to now that has found its way on to this old planet, in order to realize that he's right up against it."

He knew his own mind and she didn't know hers. Such a man was terribly hard to resist.

"He says any morning at twelve. I suggest tomorrow."

"You insist?" She was struggling helplessly in meshes of her own weaving.

"I insist. And my last word is that if you let the old beast down us, as of course he'll try to do, I go back to B. C. and remain a single man to the end of my days. And I'm not out for that, as long as there is half a chance of something better. So that's that." In the style of the great lover he laid a hand on each shoulder, looked into the troubled eyes and kissed her. "And now, if you please, we will witch the world with noble horsemanship."

CHAPTER VIII

A BUSY MORNING

I

THE next morning was a busy one for his Grace, and it also marked a tide in the affairs of Bridport House. Soon after ten the ball opened with the inauspicious arrival of Lady Wargrave. The head of the Family had just unfolded his newspaper and put on his spectacles when her ladyship was announced.

As the redoubtable Charlotte entered the room, the hard glitter of her eyes and the forward thrust of a dominant chin were ominous indeed. Bitter experience made her brother only too keenly alive to these portents.

Without any beating about the bush she came at once to the point.

"What's this I hear, Johnnie? Sarah tells me you have revoked that woman's notice."

"Woman!" temporized his Grace. "What woman?" The tone was velvet.

She glowered at him.

"There's only one woman in this household, my friend."

The Duke laid down his *Times* with an air of extremely well assumed indifference. Were the parish pump and the minor domesticities all she could find to

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interest her, while all sorts of Radical infamies played Old Harry with the British Constitution?

Lady Wargrave, however, was well inured to this familiar gambit.

"Come, Johnnie," she said tartly, "don't waste time. The matter's too serious. Sarah says you have asked Mrs. Sanderson to stay on."

"Yes, I have asked her to be good enough to reconsider her decision," said his Grace in the slightly forensic manner of the gilded chamber.

"On what grounds, may one ask?"

"I merely put it to her"—he now began to choose each word with a precision that made his sister writhe—"that she was indispensable to the general comfort and well-being of a man as old and gout-ridden as myself."

"Did you, indeed!"

It was a facer. And yet it might have been foreseen. Perhaps the ladies had been a little too elated by their *coup de main*; or, had they assumed too confidently that at last they had made an end of a shameless intriguer?

Yes, a facer. Charlotte could have slain her brother. He had given away the whole position. It was the act of a traitor. In a voice shaken with anger she proceeded in no measured terms to tell him what she thought of him.

His Grace bore the tirade calmly and with fortitude. He had an instinct for justice—long a source of inconvenience to its possessor!—which now insisted that there was something to be said for the enemy point of view. Still he might not have borne its presentment so patiently had Charlotte not shown her usual cunning. "She did not speak for herself," she was careful to assure him,

"but for the sake of the Family as a whole." The presence of this woman at Bridport House could no longer be tolerated.

To this the Duke said little, but he committed himself to the statement that Mrs. Sanderson was much maligned and that they all owed a great deal to her devotion.

This was too much for Charlotte. She bubbled over. "You must be mad!" Her voice was like the croak of a raven.

"Personally," rejoined his mellifluous Grace, "I am particularly grateful that she has consented to stay on."

"You're mad, my friend."

"So are we all." His Grace folded the *Times* imperturbably.

Lady Wargrave was defeated. She abruptly decided to drop the subject. However, she did not quit the room until one last bolt had been winged at her adversary, yet in order to propel it she had to impose an iron restraint on her feelings.

"Before I go"—she turned as she got to the door—"there's something else I should like to say. Jack's mother is in town and is staying with me. Like all the Parington's she has plenty of sense. She will welcome the Marjorie arrangement—thinks it quite providential—has told her son so—and she looks to you as the head of the Family to see that it doesn't miscarry."

Her brother's ugly mouth and explosive eyes were not lost upon Charlotte, but before he could reply she had made a strategic retirement. Did these futile women expect him to play the matrimonial agent? The mere suggestion was infuriating, yet well he knew the extreme urgency of the matter. The whole situation called for

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great delicacy. A combination of subtle finesse and iron will was needed if the institution to which he pinned his faith was not to be shaken to its foundations.

II

Lady Wargrave had gone but a few minutes when Jack arrived at Bridport House. He had to inform his kinsman that Mary Lawrence would appear at twelve o'clock.

The Duke was in a vile temper. Charlotte had fretted it already; moreover, the disease from which he suffered had undermined it long ago; and at the best of times the mere sight of this young Colonial, with his wild ideas, was about as much as he could bear. However, he was too astute a man and far too well found in the ways of his world not to be able to mask his feelings on an occasion of this magnitude. The fellow was a perpetual source of worry and annoyance, yet so much was at stake that the Duke, in order to deal with him, summoned all the bonhomie of a prospective father-in-law. If anything could have bridged the gulf such tones of honey must surely have done so.

Jack, however, was in no mood to accept soft speeches, no matter how flattering to the self-esteem of a raw Colonial! He was determined to put all to the touch. These people must learn the limit of their power. And as it was the 'Tenderfoot's habit to leave nothing to chance he began with the bold but simple declaration that nothing would induce him to give up the finest girl in the country. And he hoped when Mary appeared at

twelve o'clock his kinsman would bear in mind that very important fact.

Months ago his Grace had begun to despair of the rôle of the modern Chesterfield. Even since the young ass had first reported himself at Bridport House, very sound advice, based on intimate knowledge and first-hand experience, had been lavished upon him. The best had been done to correct the republican ideas he had gathered in the western hemisphere. He lacked nothing in the way of counsel and precept. But the seed had fallen on unreceptive soil, nay, on ground singularly barren. From the first the novice had shown precious little inclination to heed the fount of wisdom.

The Duke asked the young man to look at the matter in a common sense way. He would have an extraordinarily difficult place to fill; therefore, it was his clear duty to trust those who knew the ropes. The lady of his choice was a case for experts. Special qualities, inherited aptitudes were needed in the wife he married! Surely he must realize that?

The Tenderfoot said bluntly that he did and that Mary Lawrence had them.

His Grace managed to hold a growing impatience in check. But the answer of the novice had revealed such a confusion of ideas that it was hard to treat it seriously.

"Unless a woman has been born to the thing and bred up in it, how can she hope to be equal to the task?"

"Plenty of 'em are," said the Tenderfoot. "Anyhow they seem to make a pretty good bluff at it."

His Grace shook a somber head.

"You can't deny that the Upper Crust is always being recruited from the people underneath."

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"Immensely to the detriment of the Constitution," said his Grace forensically.

"It won't be so in this case," said the Tenderfoot. "Any family is devilish lucky that persuades Mary Lawrence to enter it. She's a very exceptional girl. And when you see her, sir, I'm sure you'll say so."

"A young woman of ability, no doubt." The Duke was growing irritated beyond measure, yet he was determined to give no hint of his frame of mind. "These—these bohemians always are. But if you'll allow me to say so, the mere fact that she is ready to undertake responsibilities of which she can know nothing proves the nature of her limitations."

The hit was so palpable that Jack felt bound to counter it as well as he could. But his eagerness to do so led him into a tragic blunder. "That's where you do her an injustice," he said, not giving himself time to weigh his words. "She didn't know that she might have to be a duchess when she promised to marry me."

The folly of such a speech was apparent to the young man almost before it was uttered. A sudden heightening of a concentrated gaze made him curse his own damnable impetuosity. He saw at once that the admission would be used against him; moreover, an intense desire that Mary should have fair play led him into further pitfalls. "The odd thing is," he said in his blunderer's way, "that she happens to see things here at the angle at which you see them, sir. At least, I always tell her so."

His kinsman smiled. "That gives us hope at any rate." And he even showed a glint of cheerfulness.

The Tenderfoot had a desire to bite off his tongue.

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He felt himself floundering deeper and deeper into a morass. A sickening sensation crept upon him that he had put himself at the mercy of this crafty old Jesuit.

"Now, sir, don't go taking an unfair advantage of anything I may have told you." The sheer impotence of such a speech served only to emphasize his tragic folly.

By now there was a sinister light in the eyes of his Grace. The unlucky Tenderfoot could hardly stifle a groan of vexation. Only a born idiot would have taken pains to put such a weapon in the hands of the enemy!

Overcome by a sudden hopeless anger the young man rose from his chair and fled the room. His course was not stayed until he had passed headlong down the white marble staircase and out of doors into a golden morning of July. For the next two hours he ranged the Park grass. It was the only means he had of working off an irritation and self-disgust that were almost unbearable.

III

Youth and inexperience might have put a weapon into the hand of his Grace, yet when the clock on the chimneypiece struck twelve he was in a very evil mood. The task before him was not at all to his taste; and the more he considered it the less he liked the part he had now to play.

From various sources he had heard enough of the girl to stimulate his curiosity. Apart from a lover's hyperbole, of which he took no account whatever, impartial observers, viewing her from afar, had commented upon her; moreover, there was the extremely piquant nature of her antecedents. She was a niece of the faithful

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Sanderson, she was also the daughter of a police constable.

The Duke was apt to plume himself that his instinct for diplomacy amounted to second nature. But, he ruefully reflected, his powers in this direction were likely to be tested to the full. His task seemed to bristle with difficulties. Bridport House was no place for a young woman of this kind, but it was not going to be an easy matter to tell her that in just so many words. The best he had to hope for was that she would prove a person of common sense.

When at five minutes past the hour Miss Lawrence was announced, for one reason or another, the Duke was in a state of inconvenient curiosity. And as if the mere circumstances of the case did not themselves suffice, a chain of odd and queer reflections chose to assail his mind at the very moment of her appearance.

It was terribly inconvenient for his Grace to rise from his chair, mainly for the reason that one swollen, snow-booted foot reclined at ease on another. But with an effort that wrung him with pain he contrived to stand up.

"Please don't move," said a voice deep, clear, and musical, while he was still in the act of rising. "Oh, don't—please!"

But without making any immediate reply the Duke poised himself as well as he could on one foot, more or less in the manner of an emu, and bowed rather grimly. The dignity of the whole proceeding was perhaps slightly over-emphasized, it was almost as if he intended to overawe his visitor with the note of the grand seigneur.

Whether this was the case or not the bow was returned; and slight as it was, it had a dignity that matched

his own. Also it was touched ever so gently with humor. A pair of gravely-searching eyes met the hooded, serious, half-ironical orbs of his Grace.

"Nice of you to come and see an invalid," he said slowly, very slowly, with a good deal of manner.

"A great pleasure," she smiled from the topmost inch of her remarkable height.

While these brief, and on his part decidedly painful maneuvers had been going on, the man of the world had been busily seeking something of which so far he had not been able to find a trace. In manner and bearing there was not a flaw.

Already the expert's eye had been struck by a look of distinction that was extraordinary. She was undoubtedly handsome, nay, more than handsome; she had the subtle look of race which gives to beauty a *cachet*, a quality of permanence. Her height was beyond the common, but every line of the long, slim frame was a thing of elegance, of molded delicacy. She was perhaps a shade too thin, but it gave her an indefinable style which charmed, in spite of himself, this shrewd, instructed observer. Then her dress and her hat, her neat gloves and boots, although they were models of reticence, were all touched by a subtle air of fashion which seemed somehow to reflect their wearer.

The "Chorus Girl" was in the nature of a surprise. The Duke indicated a chair, on the edge of which she perched, straight as a willow, her chin held steadily, her amused eyes veiled with a becoming gravity. As the Duke painfully resealed himself he felt a cool scrutiny upon him. And that very quality of coolness was a little provocative. In the circumstances of the case it

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had hardly a right to be there. To himself it was most proper, but in this young woman, a police constable's daughter, who earned her living in the theater, a little embarrassment of some kind would have been an added grace. If anything however she had more composure than he; and in spite of the charm and the power of a personality that was vivid yet clear-cut, he could not help resenting the fact just a little.

When at last he had slowly resettled himself on his two chairs he turned eyes of ironical power full upon her. Yes, she was amazingly handsome, and she reminded him strangely of a face he had seen. "I wonder if you know why I have asked you to be so kind as to come here," were the first words he spoke. And he seemed to weigh each one very carefully before he uttered it.

"I think I do, at least I think I may guess." The note of absolute frankness was so much more than he had a right to look for that it pleased him more than it need have done.

"Well?" he said, with a gentleness in his voice of which he was not aware.

"I'm afraid I've been causing a lot of trouble." The tone of regret was so perfectly sincere that it threw him off his guard. He had not expected this, nay, he had looked for something totally different. The girl was a lady, no matter what her private circumstances might be, and with a sudden deep annoyance he felt that it was going to be supremely difficult to say in just so many words what he had to say.

To his relief, however, she seemed with the *flair* of her sex at once to divine his difficulty. This splendid-looking

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old man, every inch of whom was grand seigneur, poor old snowboot included! was already asking mutely for her help in a situation that she knew he must dislike intensely. In his odd silence, in the defensive arrogance of his manner there was appeal to her own fineness. She could not help feeling an instinctive sympathy with this old grandee, who at the very outset was finding himself unequal to the task imposed upon him by the circumstances of the case.

They entered on a long pause, and it was left to her to break it.

"I didn't know when I promised to marry Jack that he would be the next Duke of Bridport," she said very slowly at last.

The simple speech was intended to help him, a fact of which he was well aware. And with a sense of acute annoyance he felt a latent chivalry begin to stir him; it was a chord that she, of all people, had no right to touch.

"Didn't you?" he said; and in the grip of this new emotion it would have been not unpleasant to add "My dear."

"Of course I'm much to blame," she went on, encouraged by his tone. "I realize that one ought to have made inquiries."

He was clearly puzzled. From under heavily knitted brows his keen eyes peered at her. "But why?" An instinct for fair play framed the question on her behalf.

A note of pain entered the charming voice. "Oh, one ought," she said. "It was one's duty to know who and what he was and all about him."

"Forgive me if I don't altogether agree." In spite of himself he was being conquered by this largeness and magnanimity. So fully was he prepared for something else that he was now rather at a loss. "In any case," he said, "the fault hardly seems to be yours."

"It is kind of you to say that." A pair of wide eyes, long-lashed and luminous, which seemed oddly familiar, raked him with a wonderful candor. "But I seem to be giving enormous trouble to others—trouble it would have been easy to spare them."

Again his Grace dissented. Surprise was growing, along with that other, that even more inconvenient emotion which was now driving him hard.

"Don't overlook your own side of the case," he was constrained to say.

"Oh, yes, there's that—but one doesn't like to insist on it."

"Why not?"

"The other is so much more important."

She felt his deep eyes searching hers, but except a little veiled amusement, they had nothing to conceal.

"I am by no means sure that it is." To his own clear annoyance, the fatal instinct for justice began to take a hand in his overthrow. "As the matter has been represented to me there is no doubt, if you took it to a court of law, that you would get substantial damages."

"As if one could!" She suddenly crimsoned.

"If I have hurt you in any way, I beg your pardon," he said at once with a simple humility for which she honored him. "After all, if you decide not to marry my relation you give up a position which most people allow to be exceptional."

"Yes—but if one has never aspired to it!"

He grew more puzzled.

"Can you afford to be so fastidious?—if you don't think the question impertinent?"

"I have my living to earn," she said very simply, "but of course I don't want that to enter into the case."

"Naturally. Of course. Let me put another question—if it is not impertinent?" The eyes of the Duke had now a grave amusement, but they had also something else.

"I suppose you care a good deal for this young man?"

She simply stared at him in a kind of bewilderment.

Such an answer, unexpectedly swift, nobly complete, seemed to disconcert him a little.

"And—and without a word you give him up for the sake of other people?"

"Yes—if they insist upon it."

"If they insist upon it!" He shook his head at her in rather uneasy surprise.

"I have told Jack that I cannot marry him unless he has your full consent."

Again the wide gray eyes looked out fearlessly upon the rather bewildered gentleman. They could hardly refrain from a smile at his growing perplexity. But there was something other than perplexity in his tone when at last he said, "You know of course that I cannot possibly give it."

"Of course not."

The unhesitating reply seemed to increase his surprise. This girl was taking him into deeper places than he had ever been in before. He shook his head at her in a whimsical fashion which she thought quite charming. "It hardly does, you know, to be too bright and



“You give up your young man—simply because of that?”

good for human nature's daily food," he said with a softness in his deep voice, which was enchanting.

"Oh, I'm very far from being that." She smiled and shook her head. "I won't own that I'm as bad as all that—at least I hope I'm not."

"But if you insist on being so uncommonly self-sacrificing, you're in danger, aren't you?"

"One can't call it self-sacrifice altogether."

"Afraid of being bored, eh?"

"I could never be bored with Jack," she said gravely. "But I don't see why one should pat oneself on the back for trying to live up to one's principles."

"Principles! May I ask what principles are involved in a case of this kind?"

"'Do unto others as you would be done by.' It's rather priggish, I admit, but it's a splendid motto, if only one is equal to it. As a rule it is much too much for me, but in this case I want to do my best to live up to it."

"There you go again." The old man shook an amused finger at her. "Why it's altruism, there's no other word for it."

"It's common sense—if one is able to think through to it."

"And that is why," he said, with almost the air of a father, "you give up your young man—simply because of that?"

She nodded. But her smile was rather drawn.

"Tell me, Miss Lawrence"—the curiosity of his Grace was mounting to a pitch that enabled him to match her frankness with his own—"why are you so sure that you will be unacceptable here?"

"It stands to reason, I'm afraid. If I lived at Bridport House and the future head of the Family married the housekeeper's niece, I should be bound to look on it as a perfectly hopeless arrangement."

He honored this candor. Choosing his words with great delicacy, he could but pay homage to such clear-sighted honesty. "I only hope you will not blame us too much," he said finally, with an odd change of voice.

"I don't blame you at all. You are as you are. If I lived here I am sure those would be my feelings."

The old man was touched by this generosity. Lest he should overrate it, however, she added quickly with a flash of pride, "Besides, I should simply hate to go where I was not wanted."

Patrician to the bone, he admired that, too. Every inch of her rang true. Somehow it had become terribly difficult to treat her in the only way the circumstances permitted. But no matter what his private feelings, he must hold them in check.

"Well, I think, Miss Lawrence," he said, with a return to the dryness of the man of the world, "you ought to congratulate yourself that you don't live here." But suddenly his voice trailed off. "You would not be half so fine as you are"—after all, he couldn't conceal that a deeply-stirred old man was speaking—"had you been born and bred in a hot-house."

She flushed at the unexpected words. Quite suddenly her eyes brimmed with tears.

"If I have said anything that wounds I humbly apologize," he said, with a gentleness that to her was adorable.

"Oh, no! It is only that I had not expected to have such a compliment paid me."

"Well, it's a sincere one." As he looked at her strange thoughts came into his mind; his voice began to shake in a queer way. "And it is paid you by an old man who is not very wise and not very happy." As he continued to look at her his voice underwent further surprising changes. "I wish we could have had you with us. There is not one of us here fit to tie your shoelace, my dear."

Such a speech gave pain rather than pleasure. She saw him a feudal chieftain, the head of a sacred order. Was it quite fit and proper that he should speak in that way to the humblest of his vassals? She would never be able to forget his words, but in that room, with the spirit of place enfolding her like some exquisite garment, she could almost have wished that they had not been uttered.

Suddenly she rose to go. As he regarded her in all the salient perfection of mind and mansion, it seemed too bitterly ironical that he should bar the door against her. Why were they not on their knees thanking heaven for such a creature!

"You must forgive us, even if Fate is not likely to," he said, thinking aloud.

"Please don't let us look at it in that way," was the quick rejoinder. "We all have our places in the world. And, after all, one ought to remember that it is very much easier to be Mary Lawrence than to be Duchess of Bridport."

The old man shook his head dolefully, and then, in spite of her earnest prayer that he should stay as he was, he rose with a great effort to say good-by. The

deeply-lined face was a complex of many emotions as he did so.

In the very act of taking leave, her eyes, magnetized by the room itself, strayed round it almost wistfully. Somehow it meant so much that they hardly knew how to tear themselves away. Involuntarily the Duke's eyes followed hers to a masterpiece among masterpieces on the farther wall. He could trace all that was in her mind, and the knowledge seemed to increase his pain and his perplexity.

"There's something wonderful in this room," she said, half to herself. "Something one can't put into words. It's like nothing else. I suppose it's a kind of harmony."

The Duke didn't speak, but slowly brought back his eyes to look at her. His favorite room held treasures of many kinds, yet as he well knew he was wantonly casting away a gem rarer than any in his collection. His eyes were upon a noble profile instinct with the dignity of an old race. Here was artistry surer, even more exquisite than Corot's. He could not repress a sigh of vexation.

Unwilling to part with her, he still detained her even when she had turned to go. "One moment, Miss Lawrence," he said. "Do these things speak to you?" Near his elbow was a wonderful cabinet of Chinese lacquer which housed a collection of old French snuffboxes. He opened it for her inspection, and with a little air of connoisseurship she gazed at the rarities within.

"They *are* lovely," she said eagerly.

"Honor me by choosing one as a token of my gratitude."

She hesitated to take him at his word, but he was

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so much in earnest that it would have seemed unkind to refuse.

"May I choose any one of them?"

"Please. And I hope you will do me the honor of choosing the best."

Put on her mettle she brought instinct rather than knowledge to bear on a fine collection, and chose a charming Louis Quinze.

"You have a *flair*," said the Duke, laughing. "That is the one. I am so glad you found it. I should not like you to have less than the best. Good-by!" Again he took her hand and his voice had a father's affection in it. Then he pressed the bell, opened the door, and ushered her into the care of a servant with an air of solicitude which she felt to be quite extraordinary. As he did so he apologized with a humility that seemed almost excessive for his inability to accompany her downstairs.

IV

As soon as the girl had gone, the Duke returned painfully to his chair. He was now the prey of very odd sensations, and they began to crystallize at once into emotion as deep as any he had ever felt. Something had happened at this interview which left him now with a feeling of numb surprise. The entrance of this girl into that room had brought something into his life, her going away had taken something out of it. Almost in the act of meeting a subtle bond had seemed to arise between them. It was as if each had a sixth sense in regard to the other. Their minds had marched so perfectly together that it was hard to realize that

this was the first time they had met. This rare creature had touched cords which had long been forgotten, even had they been known to exist, in the slightly dehumanized thing he called himself.

Shaken as he had never been in his life, his mind was held by the thought of her long after she had gone. Mystified, disconcerted, rather forlorn, a harrowing idea was beginning to torment him. At last he could bear it no longer. Rising from his chair with a stifled impatience, he made his way out of the room leaning heavily upon his stick. He went along the corridor as far as the head of the central staircase. Here he stood a long while in contemplation of a large, rather florid picture by Lawrence. The subject was a young woman of distinguished beauty, a portrait of his famous grandmother, the wife of Bridport's second duke. Apart from her appearance, which had been greatly celebrated, she had had a reputation for wit and charm; her memoirs of the 'Thirties had long taken rank as a classic; and no annals of the time were complete without the mention of her name.

The prey of some very unhappy thoughts, the Duke stood long immersed in the picture before him. The resemblance he sought to trace had grown so plain that it provoked a shiver. The line of the cheek, the shape of the eyes, the curve of the chin, the poise of the head on the long and slender throat were identical with the living replica he had just seen.

At last he returned to his room and rang the bell. To the servant who answered it, he said: "Ask Mrs. Sanderson to come to me."

The summons was promptly obeyed. But as Har-

riety came into the room she bore a small tray containing a wine-glass, a teaspoon, and a bottle of medicine. At the sight of these the Duke made a grimace like a petulant child.

"I am sure the new medicine does you a great deal of good." The tone was quite maternal in its tenderness.

"You think so?" The words were dubious; all the same her voice and look seemed to have an odd power of reassurance.

"Oh, yes, I think there can be no doubt of it." She measured the dose gravely.

"Well, I take your word, I take your word." And he drank the bitter draught.

She put back the glass on the tray, but as she was about to leave the room she was abruptly detained. "Don't go," he said. "Sit and let us talk a little."

She sat down.

"Did you know," he said, and the unexpectedness of the words threw her off her guard, "that I have just had a visit from—from your niece?"

"Mary!" She clutched her dress. "Mary—here!" A sudden tide of crimson flowed in the startled face. But the next instant it had grown white. "No, I didn't know," she said. And then, her soul in her eyes, she waited for his next words.

There was one stifling moment of silence, then he said: "Of course you know what is in my mind?"

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak.

While he searched his memory silence came again, and now it had the power to hurt them both. "Haven't you always led me to believe," he said in a voice of curious intensity, "that she was a nurse in a hospital?"

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Harriet did not reply at once. But at last she said, "Yes, I have always wanted you to think so."

He looked at her white face, and suddenly checked the words that rose to his tongue. Whatever those may have been, there was an immense solicitude in his manner when he spoke again. "It is not for me," he said, "to question anything you may have said, or anything you may have done."

"I did everything I could to carry out your wishes." Her voice trembled painfully. "And I—I——"

"And you didn't like to tell me," he said gently.

"Yes. I couldn't bear to tell you that she had insisted on choosing the life of all others you would have the least desired for her."

"Don't think that I complain," he said. "I know you must have had a good reason. You have always been very considerate. But it looks as if the stars in their courses have managed to play a scurvy trick."

"That they have!" Once more the swift color flowed over a fine face.

Suddenly she pressed her fingers to her eyelids to repress the quick tears.

"Never mind," he said. "The gods have been a little too much for us, but things might have been worse."

Tearfully she agreed.

"The other day when I talked with that excellent fellow, your brother-in-law, it didn't occur to me who this girl really was. I don't think I was ever told that she had been adopted by your family."

"No," said Harriet, very simply.

"Do your friends know the truth of the matter?"

"I don't think they have a suspicion—not of the real truth," she said slowly.

"Has anyone?"

"Not a soul that I know of."

"The girl herself, is she also in ignorance?"

"She knows, I believe, that she is only the adopted child of my sister and her husband, but I don't think she has gone at all deeply into the matter."

"Tell me this"—the mere effort of speech seemed to cost him infinite pain—"do you think there is a means open to anyone of learning the truth at this time of day?"

"My brother-in-law knew from the first that the child was mine, but I feel sure the real truth can never come out now."

Impassive as he was, a shade of evident relief came into his face. But the look of strain in his eyes deepened to actual pain as he said, "No doubt we ought to be glad that it is so. At the same time, I think you'll agree, that we have a duty to face which may prove extraordinarily difficult."

Harriet did not speak, but suddenly she bent her head in a quivering assent.

"You see," he said slowly, "we can no longer burke the fact that something is due to the girl herself."

Harriet's eyes suddenly filled with an intensity of suffering he could not bear to look at.

"You know the position, of course?" he said gently, after a pause.

"I know she has promised to marry Mr. Dinneford."

"But only if I give my consent."

"I am sure that is right." A note of relief came into

her tone. "She has done exactly as one could have wished."

"If one could only see the thing as clearly as you do!" he said with a reluctant shake of the head. "At any rate let us try to be as just as the circumstances will allow us to be."

"Can we hope to do justice and not hurt other people?"

"I'm afraid that's impossible, as things are. But for a moment let us try to consider the whole matter from her point of view. Perhaps you'll allow me to say at once that the course you insisted on taking seems to have justified itself completely. She is a girl to be proud of; and she appears to be living a happy and useful life. One sees now how wise it was not to take half-measures. She has been allowed to fight her own battle with the gifts of the good God, and the result does your foresight the highest credit."

The judicial words, very simply uttered, brought a flood of color to the pale cheeks. But listening with bent head, she did not look up, nor did she say a word in reply.

"The heroic method has proved to be the right one, but I think now we have to be careful not to take any unfair advantage of that fact. It's a terribly difficult case, but as far as we can we ought not to overlook what is due to the girl herself."

"But the others!" said Harriet with fear in her eyes.

"Yes, a terribly difficult situation." The Duke sighed. "But for the moment let us try to see the matter simply as it affects her. She has been made to suffer a grievous injustice so that others might benefit. The question is, must she still be made to sacrifice herself?"

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Harriet had no answer to give. The long silence which followed was almost unendurable in its intensity.

"Well?" he said at last, as he looked at her white face.

She shook her head mutely, unable to speak, unable to meet his eyes. Tears crept again along her eyelids.

"You wish me to decide?"

"Yes," she said at last.

He looked at her now with the light of pity in his face. Not at once did he speak, and when he did it was with a clear, a too-clear perception of the impotence of his words.

"The truth is," he said, "the problem is beyond me."

CHAPTER IX

AN INTERLUDE

I

AS Mary made her way from Bridport House across the Park, in the direction of Broad Place and luncheon, it came suddenly upon her that she was in a state of the most abject misery she had ever been in. It was a gorgeous midday of July, but the world had ceased to be habitable. She had come up against a blank wall. At that moment there was nothing in life to make it worth while.

In the ordeal she had just passed through a fierce pride had forbade her to show one glimpse of her real feelings. She had carried off the whole scene with almost an air of comedy, for she was determined that "those people" should not realize what wounds it was in their power to deal. But Dame Nature, now that she had the high-mettled creature to herself, was having something to say to her on the matter. A price was being exacted for these heroics and for this stoicism.

The Duke had left an impression of fine chivalry on a perceptive mind, but in spite of that, now they were no longer face to face, her deepest feeling was an angry resentment. Life was not playing fair. In the course of a strenuous three and twenty years she had

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rubbed shoulders with all sorts of men and women, but in spite of an honest catholicity of outlook, she had come to the conclusion already that there was only one kind for which she had any real use. It was not a question of loaves and fishes, or a puerile snobbishness; it was simply that one of the deepest instincts she had, the sense of the artist, demanded a setting.

Walking along, blind to everything but the misery of this reaction, she was suddenly brought up short, thrown as it were against the world in its concrete reality, by the knowledge that a pair of eyes was devouring her. Cutting across her path at an acute angle as he converged upon her from the direction of Kensington Gardens was a man wholly absorbed in the occupation of looking at her. With a start she awoke to the force of his gaze; her subconscious perception of it was so strong that it even aroused a tacit hostility.

Who was this large, lean, top-hatted creature striding towards her in a pair of aggressively checked trousers? Where had she seen that freckled face, those bold eyes, those prognathous jaws? As he came on he caught her gaze and fixed it; but she dropped her eyes at once, adroitly giving him only the line of her cheek to look at. Whoever he was, he was not a gentleman!

In the next moment, however, she had begun to realize that he was outside and beyond any trite symbol of that kind. He was less a man than a natural force; moreover, as soon as he had passed her, he stopped abruptly and turned round to follow her with his eyes. She did not need to turn round herself to verify her sense of the act, even had personal dignity not intervened to prevent her.

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She felt annoyed. Again she asked herself who he could be. When and where had she seen him? And then a light broke. It may have been the checked trousers, it may have been the prognathous jaws, but her mind was suddenly flung back upon that recent visit to Beaconsfield Villas, and a certain unforgettable scene. This slightly fantastic figure was no less a person than Lady Muriel's fiancé, the new Home Secretary.

II

Crossing to Broad Place she could not check a laugh. Wounded, angry, humiliated by the pressure of a recent event, there still lurked in her a true appreciation of the human comedy. What a pill for Bridport House to have to swallow! It was poetic justice that the pride which strained at a gnat so harmless as herself should have to gulp a real live camel in the person of the Right Honorable Gentleman.

But the laugh, after all, was hollow. Tears of vexation leaped to her eyes. And they owed more to the perception of her own inadequacy in this smarting hour than to the act of Fate. "Wretch that I am!" She was ready to chasten herself with scorpions as she crossed the familiar path into Albert Gate.

Within a very few yards were the loyal, warm-hearted friends of her own orbit. And there, alas! was the rub. Her own orbit could not satisfy her now. She craved something that all their kindness, their cheerfulness, their frank affection could not give. "Just common or garden snobbishness, my dear, that's the nature of your complaint," whispered a monitor within. "You are no better

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than anyone else when you are invited to call on a duke in Mount Street."

That might be true, or it might not, but sore and rebellious as she was, she was strongly inclined to dispute the verdict. After all, her feeling went infinitely deeper. It was futile, however, to analyze it now. This was not the place nor was there present opportunity. She glanced at the watch on her wrist. It was one o'clock.

The watch on her wrist was as hostile as everything else in her little world just now. Even one o'clock had a sharp sting of its own. "Don't be late for lunch," had been Milly's parting words. "Charley Cheesewright is coming. And he's dying to meet you."

She managed to navigate the vortex of Knightsbridge without knowing that she did so; and then, all at once, she realized that she was within twenty yards of Victoria Mansions, and that a rather overdressed young man was a few yards ahead.

With a feeling akin to nausea she pulled up in time to watch this short, squat figure disappear within the precincts of Number Five. For a reason she couldn't explain she was quite sure that this was none other than Mr. Charles Cheesewright. She didn't know him; if a back view meant anything she had no wish to know him; certainly she had no desire to make his acquaintance going up in the lift.

She hung back a discreet three minutes on the pavement of Broad Place before daring to enter the vestibule of Number Five, Victoria Mansions. By then the coast was clear; Mr. Charles Cheesewright, apparently, had gone up in the Otis elevator. And she stood on the

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mat, drawn and tense, a figure of tragedy, waiting for the Otis elevator to come down again.

III

At last the Otis elevator came down and she went up in it. And then confronted by the door of the flat, she peered through the glass panel to make sure that Mr. Charles Cheesewright was not standing the other side of it; then she opened it with a furtive key, slipped in, and stole past the half-open door of the tiny drawing-room through which came the penetrating accents of Mrs. Wren attuned to the reception of "company."

Once in her own room her first act was to look in the glass with a lurking sense of horror; the second was to decide, which she instantly did, that it would be quite impossible to meet Mr. Cheesewright, and that she didn't need any luncheon.

By the time she had taken off her hat and made herself a little more presentable, both these decisions had grown immutable. She could *not* meet Mr. Cheesewright, she did *not* want any luncheon. All she needed was complete solitude, and perhaps a cigarette. But all too soon was she ravished of even these modest requirements. Milly burst suddenly into the room.

"Twenty past one!" she cried reproachfully. "I didn't hear you come in. We are waiting for you."

Mary saw that her plan must be given up. If she really meant to forgo a meal and the honor of Mr. Cheesewright's acquaintance there would have to be a satisfactory explanation. But what explanation could she make? Certainly none that would conceal the truth.

And at that moment she wished almost savagely for it to be concealed. Confronted by a choice of evils she made a dash at the less.

"I'm so sorry. I'll be with you in one minute."

Sheer pride forced her tone to a superhuman lightness, verging on gayety. But there was a formidable member of her sex to deal with. In spite of that heroic note, Milly was not to be taken in; she looked at the dissembler with eyes that saw a great deal too much. "I expect you've taken a pretty bad toss, my fine lady," they seemed to say.

"I'll be with you in one minute," repeated Mary, with burning cheeks and a beating heart. But Milly continued to stare. Suddenly she laid impulsive hands on her shoulders and gave her a kiss.

Mary didn't like kissing. Her friend's proneness to the habit always irritated her secretly; this present indulgence in it brought Mary as near to active dislike as it would have been possible for her to get.

Milly went back to the drawing-room seething with an excited curiosity. Before she could make up her mind to follow Mary stood a long moment in black despair; and then "biting on the bullet," as the soldiers say, she went to join the others.

"Naughty girl!" was the arch reception of Mrs. Wren. "I'm very cross. Didn't you promise not to be late? But if you must call before lunch on dukes in Park Lane I suppose people like us will have to take the consequences."

Mary would gladly have given a year's salary for the head of Mrs. Wren on a charger, but Milly intervened

neatly with the presentation of Mr. Cheesewright, in itself a little masterpiece of quiet humor.

Princess Bedalia's reception of Mr. Charles Cheesewright was perhaps the severest test to which her sterling goodness had been exposed. Every nerve was on edge. She wanted to slay Mr. Cheesewright, braided coat, turquoise tie-pin, diamond sleeve links, immaculate coiffure and all. But for the sake of Milly she dra-gooned her feelings to the pitch of bowing quite charmingly.

Luncheon, after all, was not so bad. Mrs. Wren was frankly at her worst and most tactless; her one idea was to impress the guest, to let him see that money was not everything, and that judged by her standards he was a most ordinary young man. For such a democrat her table talk was surprisingly full of Debrett. It was all very lacerating, but Mary continued to play up as well as she knew how. And by the time the meal was half over the reward of pure unselfishness came to her in the shape of a quite unexpected liking for Mr. Charles Cheesewright.

By all the rules of the game, that is, if mere outward appearance went for anything, Mr. Cheesewright should have been insufferable. But at close quarters, with curried prawns and chablis before him, and a very fine girl opposite, he was nothing of the kind. Mrs. Wren had confided to Mary a week ago, "that she was afraid from what she had heard, that he was not out of the top drawer." The statement had been provoked by an odious comparison with Wrexham, "who," declared Milly in her most aboriginal manner, "had, as far as mother was concerned, simply queered the pitch for everybody."

Perhaps in the eyes of Mary it was Mr. Cheesewright's supreme merit that, in spite of his clothes, he was modestly content to be his humble self. In every way he was a very middling young man. But he knew that he was and, in Mary's opinion, that somehow saved him from being something worse. Mrs. Wren was far from agreeing. His face and form were plebeian, but there was no reason why he should take them lying down. He was Eton and Cambridge certainly—or was it Harrow and Oxford?—anyhow an adequate expression of a sound convention; and it was for that reason no doubt that all through a particularly trying meal he kept up his end bravely. In fact, he did so well that he earned the gratitude of the young woman opposite, although he was far from suspecting that he had done anything of the kind.

She had begun by counting the minutes and in looking ahead to the time when she could retire with her wounds. But there was a peculiar virtue in the meal; at any rate it agreed so well with the natural constitution of Mr. Charles Cheesewright that he was able to relieve the tension of the little dining-room without knowing it. He wasn't brilliant, certainly, but he talked plainly, sanely, modestly about the things that mattered; the Brodovsky Venus at the Portman Gallery, the miserable performance of Harrow, the new play at the Imperial, the sure defeat of America's Big Four, Mr. Jarvey's new novel, the prospect of the Kaiser lifting the pot at Cowes, and other matters of international importance, so that by the time coffee and crème-de-menthe had rounded up the meal, Mary was inclined to feel sorry that it was at an end.

When a few minutes before three Mr. Cheesewright went his way—to have a net at Lord's Cricket Ground—the famous Princess Bedalia felt a pang of regret. He had played a pretty good innings already, even if he didn't seem to know it. And the honest shake of her hand did its best to tell him so.

IV

As soon as Mr. Cheesewright had gone, Mary prepared to go too. But before she could retire Milly and her mother were at her. Both had a pretty shrewd suspicion that she had been making a sorry mess of things at Bridport House. These ladies, however, were so cunning, that they did not show their hands at once. To begin with, they exchanged a glance full of meaning, and then as Mary got up and made for the door, Mrs Wren commanded her to sit down again and tell them what she thought of Charley. That was guile. She didn't in the least want to know what anyone thought of Charley; besides, it would have been quite possible for Mary to deliver her verdict even as she stood with the knob of the door in her hand.

"I like him—*immensely!*" she said, returning to the sofa in deference to Mrs. Wren.

Mother and daughter looked at her searchingly, with eyes that questioned.

"I like him—*immensely!*" she repeated.

"He's not the kind of man," said Mrs. Wren with an air of vexation, "I should have written home about when I was a girl."

"What's wrong with him?" said Milly, bridling. "Why do you always crab him, mother?"

"I—crab him!" Mrs. Wren's air was the perfection of injured innocence. "Nothing of the kind. It isn't his fault he's not a blue blood—and if my lord of Wrexham's form is anything to go by, he may be none the worse for that."

"Yes, of course, as far as you are concerned Wrexham's the fly in the ointment," said Milly with a sudden flutter of anger.

Mary would have given much to escape, but to have fled with thunder and forked lightning in the air would have been an act of cowardice, not to say treachery.

The truth was Mrs. Wren still had other views for Milly, but up till now Wrexham had disappointed her. Moreover, both these clear-headed and extremely practical ladies were inclined to think he would continue to do so. For one thing he was under the thumb of his family, who were as hostile as they could be; again Wrexham was a bit of a weakling who didn't quite know his own mind. Certainly he had a regard for Milly, but whether it would enable him to wear a martyr's crown was very doubtful. Milly, at any rate, had allowed a second Richmond to enter the field of her affections, in the shape of Mr. Charles Cheesewright, the sole inheritor of Cheesewright's Mixture, a young man of obscure antecedents but of considerable wealth. So far Mr. Cheesewright had received small encouragement from Mrs. Wren, and Milly herself had been very guarded in her attitude; yet it was as plain as could be that one of the more expensive of the public schools and one of the older universities had made a little gentleman of Mr. Cheesewright. "But," as Milly said, "the truth was Wrexham had simply queered the pitch for everybody."

Mary, as the friend of all parties, including Mr. Cheesewright, who had unexpectedly found favor in her sight, felt it to be her duty to stay in the room, so that, if possible, oil might be poured on the troubled waters. She had sense of acute discomfort, it was true; and it was not made less by the sure knowledge that the heavy weapons mother and daughter were using for the benefit of each other would soon be turned against herself.

There was not long to wait for this prophecy to be fulfilled. As soon as the ladies had cut off her retreat, they dropped the academic subject of Mr. Cheesewright and bluntly demanded to know what was the matter. It was vain for Mary to try to parry this expected attack. Her friends, when their feelings were deeply stirred, indulged in a sledge-hammer style of warfare, against which any ordinary kind of defense was powerless.

"Don't tell me," said Mrs. Wren, "that you have let them bully you into giving him up!"

This was what Milly was wont to call her mother's "old Sadler's Wells touch" with a vengeance. The victim bit her lip sharply, but she could not prevent the color from rushing to her cheeks and giving her completely away.

"Why, of course she has!" cried Milly, looking at her pitilessly. "I knew she would. I told you, my dear, she was set on doing something fantastic. And here have I been telling Charley that one day she would be a duchess."

"I call it soppy," said Mrs. Wren.

"Downright mental flabbiness," cried Milly. "It's the sort of thing a girl would do in the *Family Herald*."

Mary quailed before these taunts. Even if her friends

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had an unconventional way of expressing themselves, it did not blind her to the poignant nature of their emotions. In the tone of mother and daughter was a note which showed how deeply they were wounded by her moral weakness—they could consider it nothing else. And the bitterness of the attack was the measure of their devotion. Mrs. Wren could hardly restrain her tongue, Milly was at the verge of tears. Such a girl as Mary Lawrence had no right to wreck two lives for a mere whim.

"You are nothing but a fool," said Mrs. Wren. "You'll never get such a chance again. I'd like to shake you."

Mary had no fight left in her. She sat on the sofa a picture of dismay. For the first time she saw mother and daughter as they really were, in all their native crudeness; yet when the worst was said of them they had a generosity of soul which made them suffer on her account; and that fact alone seemed to leave her at their mercy.

"You've no right to let them ruin your life and his," said Milly pitilessly.

"One simply can't go where one isn't wanted," said Mary at last with a face of ashes.

Mrs. Wren took up the phrase, the first the girl had been able to utter in her own defense, and flung it back. "Not wanted forsooth! Who are they that they should pick and choose! A dead charge on the community—neither more nor less."

"No one can't," said Mary, tormentedly. "How could one!"

"Rubbish!" said Mrs. Wren. "You can't afford to be

so proud. From the way you talk you might be the Queen of England."

The girl shook her head. "And it isn't quite fair that they should have to put up with me."

Those unfortunate words were made to recoil upon her heavily. Both her assailants were frankly amazed that she should want to look at the matter from the enemy point of view. To such a mind as Mrs. Wren's it could only mean that Bridport House had hypnotized her with the semblance of place and power.

"I could shake you," re-affirmed the good lady. "A girl as first-rate as you are has no right to be a snob."

Somehow that barb was horrible. Nothing wounds like the truth.

Strong in the conviction that "she had got her" Mrs. Wren proceeded. "You set as high a value on these people as they set on themselves. It's noodles like you who keep them up. What use are they anyway, except to play the fool with honest folk?"

"Yes, that's right," said Milly with flashing eyes, as she took up the parable. "Wrexham's one of the same push. His lot simply won't look at me, yet I consider myself the equal of anyone. And I should make a very good countess."

Mary could only gasp. She was rather overcome by this naïveté.

"So you would, my dear," said Mrs. Wren. "And one of these days you will be a countess—if you don't throw yourself away on Tom, Dick, and Harry in the meantime."

Mary was hard set not to break out in a hysterical laugh. She was in the depths if ever soul was, yet the

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sense of humor is immortal and survives every torment.

Fate, however, had not yet given the last turn to the screw.



At this moment the neat parlormaid came into the room.

"Mr. Dinneford!" she announced.

Jack stood a moment on the threshold to gaze at the three occupants. He was rather like a sailor who fears foul weather and has not the courage to read the sky.

"I'm glad you've come, young man," said Mrs. Wren, getting up to receive him. And she added almost at once, for it was never her way to beat about the bush, "We are giving her the finest talking to she has ever had in her life."

Jack nearly groaned. The look of the three of them had told him already that she must have made a fearful hash of things.

By now the Tenderfoot had risen very high in Mrs. Wren's favor. To begin with he would one day be the indubitable sixth Duke of Bridport—a handicap, no doubt, in the sight of some types of democrat, but apparently not, in the eyes of Mrs. Wren, an insuperable barrier. Again, she was a pretty shrewd judge of a man, and this one had passed all his examinations so far with flying colors. He was absolutely straightforward, absolutely honorable; moreover, he knew his own mind—whereby he had a signal advantage over his stable companion, who, in spite of great merits, was lacking in character.

"Yes, we are setting her to rights," said Milly,

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wrinkling a nose of charming pugnacity. The face of the culprit was tense and rather piteous, but Jack's glance at it was perfectly remorseless.

"I knew she would," he groaned.

"Knew she would what?" demanded Mrs. Wren.

"Let Uncle Albert down her," was the prompt rejoinder.

"That didn't want much guessing," said Milly bitterly.

"Bridport-House-itis! That's her trouble," said Mrs. Wren. "And she seems to have quite a bad form of the disease. I can't understand such a girl, I can't really. To me she's unnatural. If I found people 'coming the heavy' over me, I should just set my back to the wall and say, 'Very well, my fine friends, I'm now going to let you see that Jane Wren is every bit as good as you are.'"

"So would any other reasonable being." And that unpremeditated speech of the Tenderfoot's would have made Mrs. Wren his friend for life, had she not become so already.

"That's what I call sensible," said she. "And there's only one thing for you to do now, young man, and that is to take her straight away and marry her."

At this point Mary got up from her sofa. But Mrs. Wren held one great advantage; she had her back to the door. "You don't leave this room, my fine lady"—again "the old Sadler's Wells touch," and Jack and Milly could not deny that it was rather superb—"until you realize that we all think alike in this matter."

"Quite so," said the Tenderfoot, immensely stimulated by this powerful backing. "Let us try to see the thing as it is. This isn't a case for high falutin' sentiment.

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Bridport House is steeped in crass idiocy; all the more reason, I say, that we give it no encouragement."

"Quite so," chimed Mrs. Wren.

"Quite so," chimed Milly, who was irresistibly reminded of a recent command performance of "Money."

Mrs. Wren shook a histrionic finger at the luckless Mary, whose eyes were seeking rather wildly a means of escape. "Don't speak! Don't venture to say a word!" The victim had not shown the least disposition to do so. "You simply haven't a leg to stand on, you know."

It was a shameful piece of bullying but the victim bore it stoically. And it did not go on for long. Neither Mrs. Wren nor Milly was exactly a fool. As soon as they saw that main force was not likely to help them, and that more harm than good might be done by it, they decided to leave the whole matter to Jack. They had expressed their own point of view very fully, they knew that he could be trusted to make the most of his case; besides, when all was said, he was the person best able to deal with an entirely vexatious affair.

Of a sudden, the astute Milly flung a swift glance at her mother and got up from her chair. And without another word on the subject, this pair of conspirators dramatically withdrew.

VI

Such an exit from the scene was far more eloquent than words. And its immediate effect was to plunge Jack and Mary with a haste that was hardly decent, into what both felt was perilously like a final crisis. Its very nature was of a sort that a finer diplomacy would have

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been careful to avoid. But Jack, baffled and angry, was not in a mood to temporize; besides, that was never his way.

The fine shades of emotion were not for him, but he had the perception to feel that if he remained five minutes longer in that little room the game might be lost irretrievably. In fact, it seemed to be lost already. The specter of defeat was hovering round him; nay, it was embodied in the very atmosphere he breathed.

Knowing the moment to be full of peril, he determined to force himself to the greatest delicacy of which he was capable, for this might prove the final throw. The look in her eyes seemed to tell him that all was lost, but he would set the thought aside and act as if he were not aware of it.

A long and very trying pause lent weight to this decision, and then at last he said in a tone altogether different from the one he had recently used, "Tell me, why are you so determined to keep a hardshell like Uncle Albert on his pedestal?"

The form of the question provoked a wry little smile. "We poor females are by nature conservative."

"You are that," he said. "Take you and me. We've both seen the world. And the world has changed me altogether, but I should say it hasn't changed you at all."

"No; I don't think it has," she admitted ruefully, "in the things that are really important."

"Six years ago, before I went West, I saw Bridport House at pretty much the same angle you see it now. But I suppose if you get lumbering timber, or living by your wits, or looking for gold in the Yukon, it might soon come home to you that it is only realities that

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count. And the cold truth is that Bridport House simply isn't a reality at all."

"There I can't agree with you," she said with a simple valor he was bound to admire. "I haven't seen the Yukon, but I've seen Bridport House and it's intensely real to me. Somehow the place is quite wonderful. It works upon one like a charm."

"I was a fool to let you go there."

"But it only confirms my guesses."

"Why, you are as bad as your Aunt Sanderson," he burst out. "And you haven't her excuse. One can understand her point of view, although it's very extreme, and absurdly overdone, but yours, if you'll let me say so, is merely fanciful. Why you should be absolutely the last person in the world to be hypnotized by mere rank and pride of place."

"It isn't that at all."

"What is it, then?"

"It's something I can't explain, a kind of instinct, I suppose. Please don't think I'm overawed by vain shows. But there is such a thing as tradition, at least there is to me, and every stick and stone of that house simply glows with it."

"Mere sentiment!"

"Oh, yes—I know—but sentiment's the thing that rules the world."

"Plain, practical common sense rules the world."

"I mean the only world worth living in."

He could do nothing with her, and the fact was now hurting him horribly. A man used to his own way, of clear vision, and strong will, he could not bear the thought of being sidetracked or thwarted. Besides, her

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reasoning was demonstrably false. He was growing bitterly annoyed but, after all, such a solicitude for others only added to her value. Moreover, here was a nature almost fantastically fine, and for decency's sake he must constrain his egotism to respect her scruples.

But the sense of defeat was hard to bear. Since that morning's fatal visit to the Mecca of tradition her will had crystallized. There seemed little hope of shaking it now.

"Let me ask one question," he said tensely. "Do you still care for me?"

Before she could answer the question her breath came quickly, her color mounted. And then she said in a low voice, "I do—I always shall."

It was no use telling her she was a fool. She was grotesquely in the wrong, even if she was sublimely in the right. He would like to have shaken her—and yet how dare he sully her with a point of view which was purely personal?

"I expect that old barbarian is laughing finely in his sleeve," he said with a sudden descent to another plane.

"You don't read him right." A warm throb of feeling was in her voice. "He's quite deep and true—and kind, so kind you would hardly believe. When I went there this morning I felt I was going to hate him, and yet I find I can't."

"You are an idealist," he said. "And you've tuned up that old cracked fife to the pitch of your own sackbut and psaltery. He's not fine in any way if you see him as I do—but I'm an earthworm, of course. He's just a hardshell and an unbeliever, who runs tradition for all

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it's worth, because that means loaves and fishes for him and his."

She countered this speech staunchly; it was not worthy of him. And yet the tone of reproof was so gentle that it gave him new courage. Besides, he was a born fighter and the mere thought of losing such a prize was more than he could bear.

"You can't go back on your word," he burst out with sudden defiance. "You made a promise that you're bound to keep."

The look in her eyes asked for pity. "Oh! I could never go there," she shivered, "among all those hostile women."

"We will keep a thousand miles away from them."

"They have told me I'm not good enough."

"Like their damned impertinence!" He flushed with anger.

"But I promised this morning that I wouldn't."

"You first promised me that you would."

Again he had her cornered. It was almost the act of a cad to drive her so hard, but he was an elemental who had simply to obey the laws of his being. It seemed madness and damnation to let her go. And yet there were tears in her eyes which he dare not look at. If he saw them he was done.

With a kind of savage joy he felt her weaken a little at the impact of his will. It was a piece of cruelty for which there was no help, a form of bullying he could not avoid.

"The best thing we can do," he said suddenly, "is to get married at once and then clear off to Canada. Then we shall be beyond the jurisdiction of Bridport House."

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"That old man would never forgive me," was the simple reply. "It would make the whole thing quite hopeless for everybody."

He checked the words at the tip of his tongue. She had no right to play for the other side, but there was something in her bearing which shamed him to silence. For the first time he was torn; this immolation of self might be a deeper wisdom; at least he felt thin and shallow in its presence.

"Won't you help me?" She laid a hand on his. Tears were now running down her cheeks.

He caught his breath sharply at the unexpected appeal; it was like the fixing of a knife. There was no alternative; he saw at once with fatal clearness that these four little words cut the ground from under his feet.

"Of course I will," he said miserably, "if that is how you really feel about it."

She bowed her head in the moment's intensity. "Thank you," she said softly.

He could only gasp. Here was the end.

"We must forget each other," she said stoically.

"Or ask the sun and moon to stand still," he said. "I shall never marry anyone else."

She gave him the honest hand of the good comrade and he took it to his lips.

"I shall go back to Canada."

"Won't you stay and help them?"

"No," he said, "these stupid people have got on my nerves. Besides, this city is not big enough to hold us both just now."

"I intend to go to Paris and study for the opera."

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"No," he said decisively. "This time next week I shall be on my way back to Vancouver, unless——"

"Unless——?"

"Unless Bridport House can be made to forget the Parish Pump in the meantime. And there's hardly a chance of that."

CHAPTER X

TIME'S REVENGE

I

HIS Grace had had such a very bad night that he was only just able to reach his morning-room by the discreet hour of eleven. He was so exceedingly irritable that even the presence of the *Times* on the little table at his elbow was almost too much for him. And barely had he settled himself in his chair and put on his spectacles when an acute annoyance with the nature of things was further increased by the ill-timed appearance of his private secretary, Mr. Gilbert Twalmley.

Mr. Twalmley so well understood the art of being agreeable, that, of itself, his appearance was seldom if ever unwelcome; had the fact been otherwise it is reasonably certain that long ago he would have had to seek some other sphere of usefulness. And even on this sinister morning Mr. Twalmley was not the head and front of his own offending; the germ of unpopularity was in the message that he bore.

"Sir Dugald Maclean has rung up, sir. He would like to know if you can see him on a matter of urgent importance."

"When?" said the Duke sourly.

"He will come round at once."

The fact was clear that his Grace was not in a mood to receive anyone just then, least of all Sir Dugald Maclean, who at any time was far from being *persona gratissima* at Bridport House. But after a mental struggle, which if quite short was rather grim, he allowed public policy to override his private feelings.

"I suppose I'd better," he said with something ominously like a groan of disgust.

II

Even when the decision was taken and Mr. Twalmley had gone to make it known, the Duke was not quite clear in his mind as to why he should submit to such an ordeal. Was it really necessary to see this man? Would any purpose be served by his so doing?

This morning the Duke was in a mood of vacillation, itself the sequel to a night of physical and mental torment. Men and events and Nature's own self were conspiring against him; the future and the past were alike in their menace; he could see nothing ahead but a vista of anxiety.

Waiting for this man whom he disliked so intensely, he tried at first to fix his mind on the morning's news, and failed lamentably. For one thing the paper itself was a sinister portent of the times. But there were others, and in the interval of waiting for an unwelcome visitor his Grace reviewed them gloomily.

Albert John had lived to see dark days. At heart a time-server and a cynic, his strongest wish had been to go to the grave in the faith of his fathers. In the beginning none had realized more clearly than he that dukes

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were not as other men. Born to that convenient dogma, or at least having imbibed it with the milk of infancy, it was in the very marrow of his bones. But now, it would seem, the Time Spirit had overtaken the order to which he belonged.

Twin portents of that fact had hovered all night round his pillow. First came the business of Jack and the lady of his choice, who at close quarters had proved to be so much more than his Grace had bargained for; then there was the minor yet entirely vexing complication of Muriel and her Berserker of a Radical.

Compared with the first gigantic issue, the second was a mere sideshow, which in a happier hour his Grace would have treated with sardonic contempt. After all, did it greatly matter if Muriel had the ill taste to prefer an obvious political thruster and *arriviste* to a state of single blessedness? The heavens were not likely to fall in either case. The man was a cad and there was no more to be said, yet even Albert John was not quite able to maintain the standpoint of High Olympus. Such a mountebank of a fellow ought not to count, yet when the best had been said there was something about the brute which rankled horribly.

Some years before, in a historic speech in the Gilded Chamber, the Duke had drawn a lurid picture of democracy knocking at the gate. His words were so nakedly obvious that in a single morning they awoke to fame throughout a flattered and delighted island. Everybody had known for a generation that democracy was knocking at the gate, but the true art of prophecy as a going concern is to predict the event the day after it happens.

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His Grace of Bridport, in the course of an admired speech, left no doubt as to his own feeling in the matter. He conceived it to be his duty to hold the gate as long as possible against the mob. But his memorable remarks, a little touched, no doubt, with the crudity of one who spoke seldom, gave opportunity for a thruster in the person of a rising Scots publicist to convulse the Lower House with his fanciful portrait of the Great Panjandram of Bridport House with little round button on top.

That had happened some years ago. But the alchemies of time had now prepared a charming comedy for the initiated. The temerarious Scotsman, moving from triumph to triumph, had determined to consolidate his fortunes by marrying the third daughter of the house of Dinneford.

When Sir Dugald's decision became known to the Duke, his amazement took a very caustic turn. He had never forgiven the fellow for so savagely flaunting him as a trophy at the end of a pole. "*Rien qui blesse comme la vérité.*" It was therefore hard for his Grace to knuckle down to this adventurer. Besides, had Sir Dugald's opinions been other than they were, one of his kidney must not look for a welcome at Bridport House.

Democracy was knocking at the gate with a vengeance. Muriel's affair had shaken the Family to its base. For some little time past it was known that she was cultivating breadth. Her coquettings with that dangerous tendency had affected her diet, her clothes, her reading, as well as her social and mental outlook. She had formed quite a habit of emerging from the Times Book Club with all kinds of highbrows in a strap. She had made

odd friendships, she had joined queer movements, and from time to time she regaled very remarkable people with tea and cake at Bridport House.

To all this there could only be one end. First she consulted her oculist and changed her glasses, and then she fell in love. She was the first of the Bridport ladies to enter that state; thus she was less a portent than a phenomenon. Sarah, Blanche, and Marjorie gave her the cold shoulder, and Aunt Charlotte frowned, but there was no getting over the sinister fact that Breadth had at last undone her. Sir Dugald had recently been seen for the first time in one of the smaller and less uncomfortable drawing-rooms of Bridport House. The Dinneford ladies seldom read the newspapers, at least the political part of them, being beyond all things "healthy-minded" women; therefore they knew little of the facts of his career. Moreover, they were in happy ignorance of the attack he had launched three years ago upon their sire. But it cannot be said of Muriel that she was equally innocent. Evil communications corrupt good manners; Breadth had made a recourse to politics inevitable. And the slight importance she attached to a certain incident was, to say the least, unfilial.

In the cool, appraising eyes of Sarah, Blanche, and Marjorie, the bold Sir Dugald was set down already as a freak of nature. They were not used to that sort of person at Bridport House. Unfortunately such an attitude forbade any just perception of the man himself. His career was still in the making, and in the view of keen but unsympathetic observers who had followed it from the start, the hapless Muriel had been marked down in order that she might advance him in it. Moreover, up

ill now, his ambition had never known defeat, particularly when inflamed by a worthy object.

According to biographies of the People's Champion, portrait on cover, price one shilling net, which flooded the bookstalls of his adopted country, his life had been a fine expression of the deep spiritual truth, "God helps those who help themselves." His career had been truly remarkable, yet in the opinion of qualified judges it was only just beginning. In the person of Sir Dugald Maclean, Democracy was knocking at the gate with a vengeance. Its keepers must be up and doing lest Demos ravish the citadel within and get clear away with the pictures, the heirlooms and the gold plate.

"She must be out of her mind," declared the Duke at the first announcement of the grisly tidings. Lady Wargrave went further. "She is out of her mind," trumpeted the sage of Hill Street.

There were alarums and excursions, there was a pretty todo. But Muriel had grown so Broad that she treated the matter very lightly. The ruthless Sir Dugald had tied her to the wheel of his car; he was now determined to lead her to the altar with or without the sanction of his Grace.

III

All too soon for the Duke's liking in this hour of fate, Sir Dugald arrived for his interview. At any time he was a bitter pill for his Grace to swallow; just now, in the light of present circumstances, it called for the virtue of a stoic to receive him at all.

Now these adversaries met again certain ugly memories were in their minds. But the advantage was with

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the younger man who could afford to be secretly amused by the business in hand. A semblance of respect, to be sure, was in his bearing, but that was no more than homage paid by worldly wisdom to the spirit of place. Right at the back lay the mind of the cool calculator, which in certain aspects had an insight almost devilish into the heart of material man. Well he knew the hostility of this peevish, brooding invalid. He was in a position to flout it; yet, after all, the man who now received him would have been rather more than human had he not hated him like poison.

Sir Dugald could afford to smile at this figure of impotence; yet the Duke, in his way, was no mean adversary. Up to a point his mind was extremely vigorous. The will to prevail against encroachment on the privileges of his class was still strong. Besides physical suffering had not yet bereft him of a maliciously nice appreciation of the human comedy. It may even have been that which now enabled him to receive "the thruster."

As Sir Dugald entered the room he was keenly aware that the eyes of a satyr were fixed upon him. And the picture of a rather fantastic helplessness, propped in its chair, was not without its pathos. The old lion, stricken sore, would have given much to rend the intruder, but he was in the grip of Fate.

The success of Sir Dugald had been magical, but luck had played no part in it, beyond the period of the world's history and the particular corner of the globe in which he happened to be born. He had got as far as he had in a time comparatively short for the simple reason that he was a man of quite unusual powers.

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No man could have had a truer perception of the conditions among which he had been cast than Dugald Maclean, no man could have had a stronger grasp of certain forces, or of the alchemy transmuting them into things undreamt of; no man could have had a bolder outlook upon the whole amazing phantasmagoria evolved by the cosmic dust out of the wonders within itself. The Duke had the cynicism of the materialist; the man who faced him now had the vision of him who sees too much.

The Duke, with a great air and a courtesy which was second nature, begged his visitor to forgive his being as he was.

Sir Dugald, with a mechanical formula and a mechanical smile, responded with a ready sympathy. But while their conventional phrases flowed, each marked the other narrowly, like a pair of strange brigands colloquing for the first time on the side of a mountain. It was as if each knew the other for a devil of a fellow, yet not quite such a devil of a fellow as he judges himself to be.

Efficiency was the watchword of Maclean. There was no beating about the bush. He knew what he wanted and had come to see that he got it. In a cool, aloof, rather detached way he lost no time in putting forward the demand he had made at a former meeting.

"But one has been led to infer from your speeches," said the Duke, bluntly, "and the facts of your career, that you stand for an order of things very different from those obtaining here."

"Up to a point, yes," was the ready answer. "But only up to a point. In order to govern efficiency it is wise to aim at a centralization of power. The happiest communities are those in which power is in the hands

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of the few. Now there is much in the social hierarchy, even as at present constituted, which deserves to survive the shock of battle that will soon be upon us. It ought to survive, for it has proved its worth. And in identifying myself with it I shall be glad when the time comes to help your people here if only you will help me now."

"In a word, you are ready to throw over your friends," said the Duke with a narrowing eye.

"By no means! I have not the least intention of doing that."

His Grace was hard to convince; besides the man's nonchalance incensed him. "Well, as I have told you already, the only terms on which we can begin to think of having you here are that you quit your present stable."

"Don't you think you take a parochial view?" The considered coolness had the power to infuriate. "Which-ever stable one happens to occupy at the moment is not very material. It is simply a means to an end."

"To what end?"

"The better government of the country—of the Empire, if you prefer it."

"You aim at the top?"

"Undoubtedly. And I think I shall get there."

The note of self-confidence was a little too much for his Grace. He shot out an ugly lower lip and plucked savagely at the small tuft of hair upon it. "That remains to be seen, my friend." And he added in a tone of ice, "When you have got there you can come and ask me again."

"But it is going to take time," Sir Dugald spoke lightly and readily, not deigning to accept the challenge.

"Meanwhile Lady Muriel and I would like to get married."

It seemed, however, that the Duke had made up his mind in the matter quite definitely. There must be a coat of political whitewash for a dirty dog before he could hope to receive any kind of official sanction as a son-in-law. Such in effect was the last word of his Grace; and it was delivered with a point that was meant to lacerate.

It did not fail of its effect. Somehow the ducal brand of cynicism was edged like a razor, and the underlying contempt poisoned the wounds it dealt. The man who had sprung from the people, who in accordance with the brutal innuendo of the man of privilege would be only too ready to throw them over as soon as they had served his turn, was powerless before it. At this moment, as he was ruefully discovering, place and power did not hesitate to use loaded dice.

Sir Dugald was savagely angry. In spite of an iron self-control, the cold insolence of one who made no secret of the fact that he regarded the man before him as other clay was hard to bear. A career of success, consistent and amazing, had given Sir Dugald a pretty arrogance of his own. And he was a very determined man playing for victory.

IV

It was clear from the Duke's manner that as far as he was concerned the interview was at an end. But Sir Dugald had made up his mind to carry the matter a step farther. He was a bold man, his position was stronger

than his Grace had reason to guess, moreover, a powerful will had been reënforced by a growing animosity.

"Before I go," said Sir Dugald, "there is one last word, and to me it seems of great importance."

The Duke sat silent, a stony eye fixed upon his visitor.

"First, let me say as one man of the world to another, that your objection to my marrying Lady Muriel is injudicious."

"No doubt—from your point of view. But we won't go into that."

"On the contrary, I think we had better. As I say, it is injudicious. We have fully made up our minds to marry. You can't hinder us, you know—so why make things uncomfortable?"

"Because I dislike it, sir—I dislike it intensely!" His Grace was suddenly overwhelmed by his feelings.

"Do you mind stating the grounds of your objection?"

"It would be tedious to enumerate them."

"Well, I'd like you to realize the advantages of letting things go on as they are."

"There are none so far as one can see at the moment."

"We are coming to them now," said Sir Dugald blandly. "In the first place, has it occurred to you that I may know the history of Mr. Dinneford's fiancée?"

The Duke stared fixedly at the man before him. "What do you mean?" he said.

"Suppose one happens to know her secret?"

"Her secret!"

"Her origin and early history."

"What do you mean?"

"Is there really any need to ask the question?"

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The Duke shook his head perplexedly. "I'm afraid I don't follow you."

"Well," said Sir Dugald coolly, "it happens that you are the one man in the world who is in a position to answer the question I have ventured to ask."

They looked at each other. A rather deadly silence followed.

"The question you have ventured to ask." The Duke repeated the words slowly, but with a reluctance and a venom he could not conceal.

"You know perfectly well what I mean." The tone, direct and cool, was exasperating.

"Are you trying to blackmail me?" There was an ugly light in the Duke's eyes.

Sir Dugald laughed. "Why put the matter so crudely?" he said. "I am merely anxious that justice should be done. You ought to be grateful to Providence for giving you this opportunity."

"Opportunity?"

"To right the wrong that has been committed."

"I don't understand."

"I refer to Miss Lawrence's parentage."

"One fails to see that her parentage is any business of yours or mine."

"It is certainly business of yours," was the sardonic answer; "and it is going to be mine because I am determined that matters shall take their present course. Lady Muriel and I intend to marry, and Mr. Dinneford and Miss Lawrence ought to marry."

The Duke gazed at him with an air of blank stupefaction.

"I invite you to give the matter very careful consider-

ation." Sir Dugald had constrained a harsh accent to the point of mellowness. "Let me say at once that if you don't withdraw your opposition it is in my power to make myself rather unpleasant."

"Nature has relieved you of any obligation in that matter. You are the most unpleasant man I have ever had to do with."

"Let me outline the position." The mellifluous note spurred his Grace to fury. "Mr. Dinneford and Miss Lawrence, Lady Muriel and I are determined to marry and we must have your consent."

"And if I don't give it?" The tone matched the truculent eyes.

"I may be tempted to use my knowledge in a way which will be much more disagreeable than the things you wish to prevent."

"Do I understand this to be a threat?"

Sir Dugald smiled darkly.

"Very well!" Defiance and resentment rode the Duke very hard. "Use your knowledge as you like. You are a scoundrel."

"A hard name." Again the Duke was met by a saturnine Scottish smile. "But my motives are sound."

"So are mine." The Duke's voice shook with fury. "If you are not careful I will have you put out of the house."

"We are not living in the Middle Ages, you know."

"More's the pity. I'd have found a short way with you then, my friend. Your wanting to marry Muriel is bad enough, your interference with Dinneford is an outrage."

"In the circumstances I feel it to be my duty to do what I can in an exceedingly delicate matter."

"Self-interest, sir, that's all your duty amounts to." But the Duke was now thoroughly alarmed, and he saw that recrimination was not going to help him. "Tell me," he said in a tone more conciliatory than he had yet used, "exactly on what ground you are standing?"

"In the first place, there is a very remarkable family likeness."

"And you base your allegation upon a mere conjecture of that kind!" said the Duke scornfully.

"Upon far more than that, believe me. I have very strong and direct evidence which at the present moment I prefer not to disclose."

The Duke paused at this bold statement. He turned a basilisk's eye upon his adversary, but Sir Dugald offered a mask, behind which, as his Grace well knew, lurked unlimited depth and cunning. One thing was clear: a man of this kidney was not likely to venture such a *coup* without having carefully weighed his resources. In any case there cannot be smoke unless there is fire. A certain amount of knowledge must be in the possession of Maclean; the question was how much, and what use was he prepared to make of it?

"Do I understand," said the Duke after a moment of deep thought, "that you have spoken of this matter to Mr. Dinneford?"

"I have not yet done so."

"Or to Miss Lawrence?"

"No—nor to Mrs. Sanderson."

The Duke's look of concentration at the mention of that name was not lost upon Sir Dugald. It had the

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effect of hardening the ironical smile which for some little time now had hung round his lips.

"May I ask you," said the Duke with the air of a man pretty badlyhipped, "not to speak of this matter to anyone until there has been an opportunity for further discussion?"

The abrupt change in the tone confessed a moral weakness which Sir Dugald was quick to notice. But he fell in with the suggestion, with a show of ready magnanimity for which the Duke could have slain him. There was no wish to cause avoidable unpleasantness. Sir Dugald was good enough to say that it was in the interests of all parties that the skeleton should be kept in the cupboard. The matter was bound to give pain to a number of innocent people, and if the Duke, even at the eleventh hour, would be reasonable he might depend upon it that Sir Dugald Maclean would be only too happy to follow his example.

V

Upon the retirement of the unwelcome visitor, the Duke gave himself up to a state of irritation verging on fury. Unprepared for this new turn of the game, taken at a complete disadvantage by a man of few scruples and diabolical cleverness, he was now horribly smitten by a sense of having said things he ought not to have said. On one point he was clear. In the shock of the unforeseen he had yielded far too much to the impact of a scoundrel.

The position seen as a whole was one of very grave difficulty, and the instinct now dominating his mind was to seek a port against a storm which threatened at any

moment to burst upon him. It was of vital importance that certain facts should be kept from certain people; otherwise there could be little doubt that the private cosmos of Albert John, fifth Duke of Bridport, would fall about his ears.

Alone with his fluttered thoughts, the Duke spent a bad half-hour trying to marshal them in battle array. Face to face with a situation dangerous, disagreeable, unforeseen, it would call for much tactical skill to fend off disaster. Never in his life had he found it so hard to choose a line of action. At last, the prey of doubt, he rang for Harriet Sanderson.

She came to him at once and he told her promptly of Sir Dugald's visit. And then, his eyes on her face, he went on to tell her there was reason to fear that a secret had been penetrated which he had always been led to believe was known only to her and to himself.

Watching her narrowly while he spoke he saw his words go home. She stood a picture of dismay.

"I wonder if the man really can know all?" he said finally.

At first she made no attempt to answer the question; but after a while, in a low, rather frightened voice, she said, "I don't think he can know possibly."

He searched her troubled eyes, almost as if he doubted. "Perhaps you will tell me this." He spoke in a tone of growing anxiety. "Would you say there is anything like a marked family resemblance?"

"A very strong one, I'm afraid."

"It is confined, I hope, to the picture at the top of the stairs?"

"Oh, no—at least to my mind——"

"Yes?"

"She has her father's eyes."

"Very interesting to know that." The Duke laughed, but it was a curious note in which there was not a grain of mirth. "Yet, even assuming that to be the case, it would take a bold man to jump to such a conclusion. Surely he would need better ground to go upon."

"I am sorry to say he has much more than a mere likeness to help him." As Harriet spoke the bright color ran from neck to brow. "He happened to be at my brother-in-law's on the evening the child was first brought to the house."

That simple fact was far more than the Duke had bargained for. A look of dismay came upon him, he shook an ominous head. "It throws a new light on the matter," he said, after a pause, painful in its intensity. "Now tell me this—did he see the child?"

"Oh, yes!"

"That helps him to put two and two together at any rate." A look of tragic concern came into his face. "What an amazing world!"

She agreed that the world was amazing. And in spite of the strange unhappiness in her eyes she could not help smiling a little as a surge of memories came upon her. She sighed softly, even tenderly as she made the confession. "To my mind, Sir Dugald Maclean is one of the most amazing men in it."

"Have you any particular reason for saying that?"—The gaze was disconcerting in its keenness—"apart, I mean, from the mere obvious facts of his career?"

"It is simply that I have watched him rise," said

Harriet, between a smile and a sigh. "When I knew him first he was a London policeman."

"How in the world did he persuade Scotland Yard to part with him?" scoffed his Grace. "One would have thought such a fellow would have been worth his weight in gold."

She could not repress a laugh which to herself seemed to verge on irreverence. "My brother-in-law says he soon convinced them he was far too ambitious for the Metropolitan Police Force."

"I should say so!"

"And then he studied the law and got into parliament."

"And made his fortune by backing a downtrodden people against a vile aristocracy." The Duke's smile was so sour that it became a grimace. "In other words a self-made man."

"Oh, yes—entirely!" The sudden generous warmth of admiration in Harriet's tone surprised the Duke. "When one considers the enormous odds against him and what he has been able to do at the age of forty-two, it seems only right to think of him as wonderful."

"Personally," said his Grace, "I prefer to regard him as an unscrupulous scoundrel."

Harriet dissented with a smile. "A great man," she said softly.

"Let us leave it at a very dangerous man. He is a real menace, not only to us, but to the country. Anyhow, we have now to see that he doesn't bring down the house about our ears."

There was something in the tone that swept the color from Harriet's face. "That I realize." Her voice trembled painfully. "Oh, I do hope he has not men-

tioned the matter to Mary." And she plucked at her dress in sudden alarm.

"Not yet, I think," said the Duke venomously. "He is too sure a hand to spring his mine before the time is ripe. Meanwhile we are forearmed; let us take every precaution against him."

"Oh, yes, we must!" Her eyes were tragic.

"A devilish mischance," said the Duke slowly, "a devilish mischance that he, of all men, has been able to hit the trail."

VI

When Harriet had gone from the room, the Duke surrendered again to his thoughts. By now they were almost intolerable. Pulled this way and that by a conflict of emotion that was cruel, he was brought more than once to the verge of a decision he had not the courage to make. The situation was forcing it upon him, yet so much was involved, so much was at stake that a weak man at bottom, he was ready to grasp at anything which held a slender hope of putting off the evil day. Two interests were vitally opposed; he sought to do justice to both, yet as far as he could see at the moment, any reconciliation between them was impossible.

He was in a state of bitter, ever-growing embarrassment, when Jack was unexpectedly announced.

His Grace was not able to detach himself sufficiently from the maelstrom within to observe the hue of resolution in the bearing of a rather unwelcome visitor.

"Good morning, sir," said the young man coolly, with an aloofness that came near to sarcasm. And then in a tone of very simple matter of fact, he said, "I have

merely called to ask if you will give a formal consent to my marrying Mary Lawrence."

From the particular way in which the question was put it was easy to deduce an ultimatum. But it came at an unlucky moment. So delicately was the Duke poised between two contending forces, that a point-blank demand was quite enough to turn the scale. His Grace replied at once that he was not in a position to give consent.

Jack was prepared for a refusal. The nature of the case had made it seem inevitable. But there and then he issued a ukase. His kinsman should have a week in which to think over the matter. And if in that time the Duke did not change his mind he would return to Canada.

The threat was taken very coolly, but his Grace was far more concerned by it than he allowed Jack to see. In fact, he was very much annoyed. Here was an end to the plan which had been formed for the general welfare of Bridport House. Such conduct was inconsiderate, tiresome, irrational. But it was not merely the inconvenience it was bound to cause which was so troublesome. There was still the other aspect of the case. He could not rid himself of the feeling that a cruel injustice was being done to an innocent and defenseless person, and that the whole blame of it must lie at his own door.

He had been given a week in which to think the matter over, in which to examine it in all its bearings. Just now he was not in a mood to urge the least objection to Jack's departure; all the same one frankly an autocrat resented it deeply. Let the fellow go and be damned to him! But in spite of the philosophic air with which he

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sent the young fool about his business, his Grace realized as soon as he was alone that it was quite impossible to shut his eyes to certain facts. Vital issues were involved and it was no use shirking them. Even if he had now made up his mind to steel his heart against gross and rather brutal injustice, so that the common weal might prosper, nothing could alter the human aspect of a matter that galled him bitterly.

CHAPTER XI

A BOMB

I

IT is a bad business, no doubt, when a statesman stoops to sentiment. Unluckily for the Duke, now that a brain cool and clear was needed in a critical hour, it had become miserably overclouded by a sense of chivalry. It was very inconvenient. Never in his life had he found a decision so hard to reach, and even when it had been arrived at he could not dismiss the girl from his mind. She had impressed him in such a remarkable way that it was impossible to forget her.

Beyond all things a man of the world, one fact stood out with exemplary clearness. If this girl could have been taken upon her merits she would have been an almost ideal mate for the heir to Bridport House. She had shown such a delicate regard for his welfare, so right had been her feeling in the whole affair, that, even apart from mere justice, it seemed wrong to exclude her from a circle she could not fail to grace. In the matter of Bridport House her instinct was so divinely right that no girl in the land was more naturally fitted to help a tiro through his novitiate.

A sad coil truly! And Jack had gone but a very few

minutes, when the matter took another and wholly unexpected turn. The prelude to a historic incident was the appearance of Sarah on the scene.

The eldest flower, the light of battle in her gray eyes, was plainly bent on mischief. So much was clear as soon as she came into the room. She had not been able to forgive her father for revoking Mrs. Sanderson's notice. It had been a wanton dashing of the cup from lips but little used to victory; and the act had served to embitter a situation which by now was almost unbearable.

Sarah had come of fell purpose, but before playing her great *coup*, she opened lightly in the manner of a skirmisher. Muriel, it seemed, was the topic that had brought her there; at any rate, it was the topic on which she began, masking with some astuteness the one so much more sinister that lay behind.

"Father, I suppose you know that Muriel has quite made up her mind to get married?"

"So I gather." Detachment could hardly have been carried farther.

"Such a pity," Sarah lightly pursued, "but I'm afraid there's nothing to be done. She was always obstinate."

"Always a fool," muttered his Grace.

"I've been discussing the matter with Aunt Charlotte."

The Duke nodded, but his portentous eyes asked Sarah not to claim one moment more of his time than the circumstances rendered absolutely necessary.

"Aunt Charlotte feels very strongly that it will be wise for you to give your consent."

"Why?" The Duke yawned, but the look in his face was not of the kind that goes with mere boredom. "Any

specific ground for the suggestion?" He scanned Sarah narrowly, with heavily-lidded eyes.

"On general grounds only, I believe."

The Duke was more than a little relieved, but he was content to express the fact by transferring his gaze to the book-rest in front of him.

"She thinks it will be in the interests of everyone to make the best of a most tiresome and humiliating business. And, after all, he is certain to be Prime Minister within the next ten years."

"Who tells you that?"

"Last night at dinner I met Harry Truscott, and that's his prediction. He says Sir Dugald Maclean is the big serpent that swallows all the little serpents."

"Uncommonly true!" His Grace made a wry mouth. "Still, that's hardly a reason why we should receive the reptile here."

"No, of course. I quite agree. But Aunt Charlotte thinks there is nothing to gain by standing out. Muriel has quite made up her foolish mind. So the dignified thing seems to be to make the best of a miserable business."

"It may be," said his Grace. "But personally I should be grateful if Charlotte would mind her own affairs."

The tone implied quite definitely that he had no wish to pursue the topic; nay, it even invited Sarah to make an end of their talk and to go away as soon as possible. Clearly he was far from understanding that it was little more than a red herring across the trail of a sinister intention. But the fact was revealed to him by her next remarks.

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"Oh, by the way, father," she said casually, or at least with a lightness of tone that was misleading, "there's one other matter. I've been thinking the situation out."

"Situation!" groped his Grace.

"That has been created." Sarah's tone was almost infantile—"by your insisting that Mrs. Sanderson should stay on."

"Well, what of it, what of it?"

"It simply makes the whole thing impossible." Sarah had achieved the voice of the dove. "So long as this woman remains in the house one feels that one cannot stay here."

"Why not?"

"Because"—Sarah fixed a deliberate eye on the face of her sire—"neither Aunt Charlotte nor I think that the present arrangement is quite seemly."

II

The attack had been neatly launched, and she saw by the look on her father's face that it had gone right home. She was a slow-witted, rather crass person, with a kind of heavy conceit of her own, but like all the other Dinneford ladies, at close quarters she was formidable. The button was off her foil. It was her intention to wound. And at the instant she struck, his Grace was unpleasantly aware of that fact.

"What d'ye mean?" It was his recoil from the stroke.

"I have talked over the matter with Aunt Charlotte. She agrees with me that the present arrangement is quite hopeless. And she thinks that as you are unwilling for

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Mrs. Sanderson to be sent away, the only course for Blanche, Marjorie, and myself is to leave the house."

The face of her father grew a shade paler, but for the moment that was the only expression of the inward fury. He saw at once that the dull fool who dared to beard him was no more than a cat's-paw of the arch-schemer. The mine was Charlotte's, even if fired by a hand infinitely less cunning.

"Is this a threat?" The surge of his rage was hard to control.

"You leave us no alternative," said Sarah doughtily. "Aunt Charlotte thinks in the circumstances we shall be fully justified in going to live with her. I think so, too; and I don't doubt that Blanche and Marjorie will see the matter in the same light."

"What do you think you will gain?" His voice shook with far more than vexation. "The proposal simply amounts to the washing of dirty linen in public."

"There is such a thing as personal dignity, father," said Sarah in her driest tone.

"No doubt; but how you are going to serve it by dancing to the piping of Charlotte I can't for the life of me see."

Sarah, however, could see something else. The blow had met already with some success. And she was fully determined to follow up a first advantage.

"Well, father"—her words were of warriorlike conciseness—"if you still insist on Mrs. Sanderson's presence here, that is the course we intend to take."

"Oh!" A futile monosyllable, yet at that moment full of meaning.

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III

The ultimatum delivered, Sarah promptly retired. She took away from the interview a pleasing consciousness that the honors were with her. And this sense of nascent victory had not grown less by half-past one when she reached Hill Street in time to lunch with Aunt Charlotte.

It was a rather cheerless and ascetic meal, but both ladies were in such excellent fighting trim that the meagerness of the fare didn't matter. Sarah was sure that she had scored heavily. A well-planted bomb had wrought visible confusion in the ranks of the foe. "He sees that it places him in a most awkward position," was her summary for the grim ears of the arch-plotter.

"One knew it would." There were times when Aunt Charlotte had a striking personal resemblance to Moltke; and just now, beyond a doubt, she bore an uncanny likeness to that successful Prussian.

"He hates the idea of what he calls washing dirty linen in public."

"Lacks moral courage as usual." The remark was made in an undertone to the coal-scuttle.

"I hope——." But Sarah suddenly bit off the end of her sentence. After all, there are things one cannot discuss.

"You hope what?" The eye of Aunt Charlotte fixed her like a kite.

"No need to say what one hopes," said Sarah dourly.

"I agree." Aunt Charlotte took a sip of hot water and munched a peptonized biscuit with a kind of savage glee. "But we have to remember that the ice is very thin. One

has always felt that—well, you know what one means. One has felt sometimes that your father . . . ”

Sarah agreed. For more years than she cared to remember she . . .

“Quite so,” Aunt Charlotte took another biscuit. “And everybody must know. . . . However, the time has now come to make an end.”

“I am sure it has,” said Sarah.

“Still we are playing it up very high,” said the great tactician. “And we shall do well to remember . . . ”

“I agree,” said Sarah cryptically.

Misgiving they might have, but just now the uppermost feeling was pride in their work and a secret satisfaction. There could be no doubt that the blow had gone home. At last they had taken the measure of his Grace, they had found his limit, the point had been reached beyond which he would not go.

“*Au fond* a coward,” Aunt Charlotte affirmed once more, for the benefit of the coal-scuttle. And then for the benefit of Sarah, with a ring of triumph, “Always sets too high a value on public opinion, my dear.”

Such being the case the conspirators had every right to congratulate themselves. And as if to confirm their victory, there came presently by telephone a most urgent message from Mount Street. Charlotte was to go round at once.

“There, what did I tell you!” said that lady. And she sublimely ordered her chariot.

IV

Enroute to Bridport House, the redoubtable Charlotte did not allow herself to question that the foe was at the

point of hauling down the flag. His hurry to do so was a little absurd, but it was so like him to throw up the sponge at the mere threat of publicity. This indecent haste to come to terms deepened a contempt which had lent a grim enjoyment to a long hostility.

However, the reception in store for her ladyship in the smaller library did much to modify her views. She was received by her brother with an air of menace which almost verged upon truculence.

"Charlotte"—there was a boldness of attack for which she was by no means prepared—"the time has now come to make an end of this comedy."

She fully agreed, yet the sixth sense given to woman found occasion to warn her that she didn't know in the least to what she was agreeing.

"You would have it so, you know."

He was asked succinctly to explain.

"Well, it's a long story." Already there was a note in the mordant voice which his sister heard for the first time. "A long, a strange, and if you will, a romantic story. And let me say that it is by no wish of my own that I tell it. However, Fate is stronger than we are in these little matters, and no doubt wiser."

"No doubt," said Charlotte drily. But somehow that note in his voice made her uneasy, and the look in his face seemed to hold her every nerve in a vise. "You are speaking in riddles, my friend," she added with a little flutter of impatience.

"It may be so, but before I go on I want you clearly to understand that it is you, not I, who insist on bringing the roof down upon us."

Charlotte's only reply was to sit very upright, with

her sarcastic mouth drawn in a rigid line. She could not understand in the least what her brother was driving at, but in his manner was a new, a strange intensity which somehow gave her a feeling of profound discomfort.

"You don't realize what you are doing," he said. "Still you are not to blame for that. But the time has come to pull aside the curtain, and to let you know what we all owe a woman who has been cruelly maligned."

Charlotte stiffened perceptibly at these words. After all, the case was no more and no less than for more than twenty years she had known it to be. Still open confession was good for the soul! It was a sordid intrigue, an intrigue of a nature which simply made her loathe the man opposite. How dare he—and with a servant in his own house! If looks could have slain, his Grace would have been spared the necessity to continue a very irksome narrative.

"Make provision for her and send her away." The sharp voice was like the crack of a gun.

The Duke raised himself slowly and painfully on his elbows. "Hold your tongue," he said. And his eyes struck at her. "Be good enough to forgo all comment until you have heard the whole story."

It was trying Charlotte highly, but she set herself determinedly to listen.

"Do you remember when she first came here, as second maid to poor Rachel, a fine, upstanding, gray-eyed Scots girl, one of the most beautiful creatures you ever saw? Do you remember her devotion? No, I see you have forgotten." He closed his eyes for an instant, while the woman opposite kept hers fixed steadily upon him. "Well, I don't excuse myself. But Rachel and I were

never happy; the plain truth is we ought not to have married. It was a family arrangement and it recoiled upon us. The Paringtons are an effete lot and the same can be said of us Dinnefords. Nature asked for something else."

Now that he had unlocked the doors of memory a growing emotion became too much for the Duke, and for a moment he could not go on. His sister, in the meantime, continued to hold him with pitiless eyes.

"One might say," he went on, "that it was the call of the blood. I remember her first as the factor's daughter, a long-legged creature in a red tam-o'-shanter, running about the woods of Ardnaleuchan. You haven't forgotten Donald Sanderson, the father?"

"No, I haven't forgotten him," said Charlotte.

"That was a fine fellow. 'Man Donald' as our father used to call him, helped me to stalk my first stag. We ranged the woods together days on end. I sometimes think I owe more to that man than to any other human being."

Again he was silent, but the eyes of his sister never left his face.

"Yes, it was the call of the blood." He sighed as he passed his handkerchief over his face which was now gray and glistening. "As I say, Rachel and I ought not to have married; we didn't suit each other. Our marriage was a family arrangement. It had almost ceased to be tolerable long before the end, but we kept our compact as well as we could, for we were determined that other people should not suffer. And then came Rachel's long illness, and the girl's wonderful devotion—do you remember how Rachel would rather have

her with her than any of the nurses? And then she died, and of course that altered everything."

Lady Wargrave sat as if carved out of stone, her eyes still upon the bleak face of the invalid. "Is that all?" she said.

"No, it is not. There's more to tell."

"Tell it then so that we may have done with it." Charlotte's voice quivered.

"Very well, since you insist." The softness of the tone was surprising, yet to Charlotte it said nothing. "Rachel died and everything, as I say, was altered. 'Man Donald's' daughter became the only woman who ever really meant anything to me. Somehow I felt I couldn't do without her. And to make an end of a long and tedious story, finally I married her."

"You *married* her!" Lady Wargrave sat as if she had swallowed a poker.

"Yes, but before doing so I made a condition. Things were to go on as they were, provided . . ."

". . . provided!" Excitement fought curiosity in Charlotte's angry voice.

". . . she didn't bring a boy into the world."

"I'm afraid I don't understand." Charlotte's voice cracked in the middle.

"It was quite a simple arrangement, and in the circumstances it seemed the best. So long as there was no man child to complicate the thing unduly, the world was to be kept out of our secret. At the time it seemed wise and right to do that. Otherwise it would have meant a fearful upset for everybody."

"Is one to understand," gasped Charlotte, "that when Rachel died you actually married this—this woman?"

The Duke nodded. "But I made the condition that our secret should be rigidly guarded—always assuming that Fate did not prove too much for us. She went to the little house on the river at Buntisford, where I used to go for the fishing and shooting. And she gave me ten years of happiness—the only happiness I have known. And then came my breakdown, since when she has nursed me with more than a wife's devotion." His voice failed suddenly and he lay back in his chair with closed eyes.

It was left to Charlotte to break the irksome silence that followed.

"How could you be so mad!" She spoke under her breath not intending her words to be heard, but a quick ear caught them.

"Nay," he said in the tone that was so new to her, "it was the only thing to do. It was the call of the blood. And this was a devoted woman, a woman one could trust implicitly."

"Madness, my friend, madness!"

He shook his head somberly. "All life is a madness, if you will a divine madness. It is a madness that damns the consequences. By taking too much thought for the morrow we entomb ourselves. When Rachel died life meant for me the woman of my choice. And, Charlotte, let me say this"—he raised himself in his chair and looked at his sister fixedly—"she is the best woman I have ever known."

For a moment she sat a picture of bewilderment, and then in a voice torn with emotion she said, "Out of regard for the others things had better go on as they are."

But perhaps you will tell me, are there any children of this marriage?"

"There is one child."

Charlotte caught her breath sharply.

"A girl. And in accordance with our compact she has been brought up in complete ignorance of her paternity. It seemed wise that she should know nothing. Her mother had her reared among her own people, because it was her mother's express wish that the children of the first marriage should suffer no prejudice; and at the present time neither the girl herself nor the world at large is any the wiser."

Charlotte began to breathe a little more freely. "At all events," she said, "that fact seems to confirm one's opinion that things had better go on as they are."

But her brother continued to gaze at her with somber eyes. "Charlotte," he said very slowly, "you have forced me to tell a story I had hoped would never be told in my lifetime. I have had to suffer your suspicions, but now that you are in the secret, you must share its responsibilities."

"I don't understand you," said Lady Wargrave bluntly.

"I will explain. A horrible injustice has been done this girl, the child of the second marriage. So much is clear to you, no doubt?"

Lady Wargrave's only reply was to tighten her lips.

"You wish me to be still more explicit?"

She invited him to be so.

"Well, as far as I can I will be." His air was simple matter of fact. "But I warn you that we are now at the point where we have to realize that Fate is so much stronger than ourselves."

A momentary hesitation drew a harsh, "Go on, let me hear the worst."

"Can't you guess who this girl is?" he said abruptly.

"Pray, why should one?"

"She is the girl Jack wants to marry."

A long silence followed this announcement. It would have been kind perhaps had he helped his sister to break it, but a clear perception of the first thought in her mind had raised a barrier. With a patience that was half-malicious he waited for a speech that he knew was bound to come.

"It was to have been expected," she said at last with something perilously like a snarl of subdued anger.

"Why expected?" They were the words for which he had waited, and he seized them promptly.

"She has been too much for you, my friend."

"Whom do you mean?"

"The mother, of course. She has planned this marriage so that she might be revenged upon us here."

He was quite ready to do Charlotte the justice of allowing that it was the only view she was likely to hold. The pressure of mere facts was too heavy. Words of his would be powerless against them; and yet he was determined to use every means at his command to clear that suspicion from her mind.

"I hope you will believe me when I tell you she is entirely innocent," he said in a voice of sudden emotion.

Charlotte slowly shook her head, but it was a gesture of defeat. She was beyond malice now.

"Charlotte, I give you my word that she had no part in it."

His sister looked at him pityingly. "It is impossible to believe that," she said without bitterness.

"So I see. But it is my duty to convince you."

For a moment he fought a growing emotion, and then his mind suddenly made up, he pressed the button of the electric bell that was near his elbow.

v

The familiar summons was answered by Harriet herself. As she came into the room her rather scared eyes were caught at once by the profile of the dowager. But the reception in store for her was far from being of the kind she had reason to expect, for which she had had too little time to prepare.

To begin with Lady Wargrave rose to receive her. And that stately and considered act was supplemented by the simple words of the Duke.

"She knows everything," he said from the depths of his invalid chair, without a suspicion of theatricality.

Harriet, all the color struck from her face, shrank back, a picture of horror and timidity.

"Sit down, my dear, and let us hold a little family council." That note of intimacy and affection was so strange in Charlotte's ear, that it hit her almost as hard as the previous words had hit the wife of his bosom. However, the two ladies sat, and the Duke with a non-chalance that hardly seemed credible, went on in a quietly domestic voice, as he turned to Harriet again. "We shall value your help and advice, if you feel inclined to give it, in this matter of Mary and the young man Dinneford."

At this amazing speech Lady Wargrave stirred un-

easily on her cushion of thorns. She breathed hard, her mordant mouth grew set, in her grim eyes were unutterable things.

"One moment, Johnnie," she interposed. "Does Mrs.—er Sanderson quite understand what it means to us?"

"Perfectly," he said, "no one better." The depth of the tone expressed far more than those dry words. "It may help matters," he added, turning to Harriet again, "if I say at once that we are going to ask you to make two decisions in the name of the people you have served so long and so faithfully. And the first is this: Since, as you will see I have been forced, much against my will, to let a third person into our secret, you have now the opportunity of taking your true position in the sight of the world."

Lady Wargrave shivered. Somehow this was a turn of the game she had not been able to foresee.

"That is to say," the Duke went on, "you have now, as far as I am concerned, full liberty to assume your true style and dignity as mistress here. For more than twenty years you have sacrificed yourself for others, but the time has now come when you need do so no longer. What do you say?"

Harriet did not speak. Lady Wargrave was silent also, but a kind of stony horror was freezing her. The whole situation had become so fantastic that she felt the inadequacy of her emotions.

"You shall have a perfectly free hand," the Duke went on. "Assume your position now, and good care shall be taken that you are amply maintained in it. What do you say, my dear?" he added gently.

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Tears were melting her now, and she was unable to speak.

"Well, think it over," said his Grace. "And be assured that whichever course you take, it will be the right one. We owe you more than we can repay. However, that is only one issue, and there is another, which is hardly less important."

Lady Wargrave stirred again on her cushion. For a moment there was not a sound to be heard in the room.

"You see," the Duke went on, "I've been giving anxious thought to—to this girl of ours. And I really don't see, having regard to all the circumstances, why justice should any longer be denied her. No matter who the man is, he is lucky to get her. And, as I understand, they are a very devoted couple."

"Oh, yes, they are!" The words were Harriet's and they were uttered in a tone broken by emotion.

"Well, you shall make the decision," he said. "You know, of course, how the matter stands." Harriet bowed her head in assent, and his Grace turned an eye bright with malice upon the Dowager. "You see, Charlotte, this girl of ours, brought up in a very humble way, and left to fight her own battle, under the providence of the good God, absolutely declines to come among us unless she has the full and free consent of the head of the clan. So far that consent has not been given, and if in the course of the next week it is not forthcoming, the young man Dinneford threatens to return to Canada."

"I see." The walls of Charlotte's world had fallen in, her deepest feelings had been outraged, but she was still perfect mistress of herself. She turned her hard eyes

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upon Harriet, but in them now was a look very different from the one that had been wont to regard the house-keeper.

Much had happened in a very little time, but to the last a fine tactician, Charlotte had contrived to keep her head. She was in the presence of calamity, she had met a blow that would have broken a weaker person in pieces, but already a line of action was formed in her mind. One thing alone could save them, and that the continued goodwill of the woman they had so long misjudged and traduced.

"Mrs. Sanderson"—she used the old name unconsciously—"we owe you a great deal." It was not easy to make the admission, even if common justice rather than policy called for it. "I hope now you will let us add to the debt."

The Duke was forced to admire the dignity and the directness of the appeal. He knew how hard she had been hit. But that was not all. Marking his sister's tone, intently watching her grim face, he saw how completely her attitude had changed. The other woman had conquered, but in spite of all he had suffered at the hands of Charlotte, it was difficult not to feel a certain respect as well as a certain pity for her in the hour of her defeat.

By this, Harriet, too, had become mistress of herself. She, also, had suffered much, but she had never played for victory, and she was very far from the thought of it now. "I have but one wish," she said.

"And that is?" His tone was strangely gentle for her voice had failed suddenly.

"To do what is right."

A BOMB

The simplicity of the words held them silent. Brother and sister looked at her with a kind of awe in their eyes. It was as if another world had opened to their rather bewildered gaze.

"I want to do right to those who have been so good to me, and to my father and my grandfather before me."

Somehow that speech, gentleness itself, yet sharp as a sword, brought the blood to Lady Wargrave's face. In a flash she saw and felt the justification of her brother's amazing deed. This devoted woman in her selflessness held the master key to life and Fate; in a flash of insight she saw that groundlings and grovelers like themselves were powerless before it. Somehow those words, that bearing, solved the mystery. She could no longer blame her brother; he had been caught in the toils of an irresistible force.

"Mrs. Sanderson"—there was reverence now in the harsh voice—"you are the best judge of what is right. We are content to leave the matter to your discretion." Even if the accomplished tactician was uppermost in Charlotte's words, in the act of uttering them was a large rather noble simplicity.

The Duke nodded acquiescence.

"I should like the present arrangement to go on," said Harriet. "Perhaps the truth will have to be known some time, but let it come out after we are dead, when it can hurt nobody."

Lady Wargrave drew a long breath of relief and gratitude.

"You are very wise," she said.

But the Duke took her up at once with a saturnine

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smile. "You seem to forget, Charlotte, that the existing arrangement can no longer go on."

"Pray, why not?"

"You have just been kind enough to tell us," he said bitingly, "that Sarah and the girls are going to live with you at Hill Street—except, of course, on one condition!"

Their eyes met. Suddenly they smiled frostily at each other.

"If you care to leave the matter to me," said Charlotte, "I will see to that."

"But that woman, Sarah," he persisted. "She's so obstinate that we may have to tell her."

Charlotte shook her head doughtily. "I think I shall be able to manage her."

"So be it." He smiled grimly. "Anyhow we shall be very glad to leave that matter in your hands."

"With perfect safety, I think you may do that." And Charlotte, sore and embittered as she was, rounded off this comfortable assurance with a long sigh of relief.

CHAPTER XII

ARDORS AND ENDURANCES

I

THERE," cried Mary upon a note of triumph.

An excited wave of that delightful journal, the *Morning Post*, accompanied the pæan. And then it was hurled across the breakfast-table with deft precision into the lap of Milly.

"A marriage has been arranged," said the courier of Hymen, "and will shortly take place between Charles, only son of the late Simeon Cheesewright and Mrs. Cheesewright, of Streatham Hill, and Mildred Ulrica, younger daughter of the late H. Blandish Wren and Mrs. Wren, 5, Victoria Mansions, Broad Place, Knightsbridge, W."

Again arose the triumphant cry.

But Mrs. Wren, excavating the interior of a boiled egg, felt it to be her duty to check this unbridled enthusiasm. For some days past, with rather mournful iteration, she had let it be known that the impending announcement could not hope to receive her unqualified approval.

In the first place, as she frankly admitted, the Marquis had spoiled her. She had to confess that he had proved

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sadly lacking in backbone when brought to the test, but his sternest critics could not deny that "before everything he was a gentleman."

Mrs. Wren ascribed her own pure taste in manhood to the fact that she had begun her career in the legitimate drama under the ægis of Mr. Painswick at the Theater Royal, Edinburgh. He, too, had been before everything a gentleman. Mr. Painswick had shaped Lydia Miffin, as she was then, in his own inimitable mold. Upon a day she was to play Grace to his Digby Grant in "The Two Roses." Then it was, as she had always felt, that she had touched her high-water mark; and the signal occasion was ever afterwards a beacon in her life. From that bright hour the Mr. Painswick standard had regulated the fair Lydia's survey of the human male. Even the late lamented Mr. H. Blandish Wren, who was without a peer in "straight" comedy, whose Steggles in "London Assurance" had never been surpassed, even that paladin——. Still it isn't quite fair to give away State secrets!

Mrs. Wren had once said of Charles Cheesewright "that he was not out of the top drawer." However, if he was not of the caste of Vere de Vere she had to own that "he had points." He was one of those young men who mean more than they say, who do better than they promise, who clothe their thoughts with actions rather than words. Also, he had two motors—a Daimler and a Rolls-Royce, he had rooms in the Albany, and though perhaps just a little inclined to overdress, he had such a sure taste in jewelry that he took his fiancée once a week to Cartier's. And beyond everything else, he had

the supreme advantage over my lord that he knew his own mind pretty clearly.

In the opinion of Princess Bedalia, Milly was an extremely lucky girl. Her young man was a simple, good fellow, honest as the day, he was incapable of any kind of meanness, he was very rich, and, what was hardly less important, he was very much in love. Milly, however, who had her mother's knack of seeing men and events objectively, did not yield a final graceful assent until she extorted a promise from Mr. Charles that he would suffer the rape of his mustache, at the best a mere scrub of an affair, and that he would solemnly eschew yellow plush hats which hats made him look like a piano-tuner.

Still, on this heroic morning, in the middle of July, Mrs. Wren seemed less pleased with the world than she had reason to be. She did some sort of justice to her egg, but she wouldn't look at the marmalade. If the truth must be told, a rather histrionic mind was still haunted by the shade of the noble Marquis. As Milly, in one of her moments of engaging candor, had told Mary already, as far as her mother was concerned Wrexham had simply queered the pitch for everybody.

Certainly that lady felt it to be her duty to rebuke Mary's enthusiasm. There was nothing to make a song about. Milly was simply throwing herself away. If everyone had had their rights, she would have been Lady W., with a coronet on her notepaper. As it was, there was really nothing so very wonderful in being the wife of an overdressed tobacconist.

Mary cried "Shame," and for her pains was sternly admonished. One who has made such hay of her own

dazzling matrimonial chances must not venture to say a word. She who might have queened it among the highest in the land merely by substituting the big word "Yes" for the small word "No" must forever hold her peace on this vexed subject. But Mary was in such wild spirits at the announcement in the *Morning Post* that she refused to be browbeaten. She continued to sing the praises of "Charley" in spite of the clear annoyance of Mrs. Wren. The good lady was unable to realize that the girl was trying with might and main to stifle an ache that was almost intolerable.

"What ho!" Milly suddenly exclaimed, withdrawing a slightly *retroussé* but decidedly charming nose from Page 5 of the *Morning Post*, "so they've actually made Uncle Jacob a Bart."

"My dear, you mean a baronet. Who?—made who a baronet?" Mrs. Wren laid down an imperious egg-spoon.

"Jacob Cheesewright, Esquire, M.P. for Bradbury, a rich manufacturer and prominent philanthropist. He's in the honor list just issued by the King's government."

"Hooray!" Mary indulged in an enthusiastic wave of the tea-pot which happily was rather less than half full. "Which means, my dear Miss Wren, that one of these days there's just a chance of your being my lady."

"As though that could possibly matter!" cried Milly upon a note of the finest scorn imaginable.

"As though that could possibly matter!" Mary's reproduction of the note in question was so humorously exact that it sent her victim into a fit of laughter.

But Mrs. Wren had her word to say on the subject. In

her opinion, which was that of all sensible people, it mattered immensely.

"As though it could!" persisted Milly.

"My dear," said Mrs. Wren, "that is shallow and ignorant. A baronetcy is a baronetcy. All people of breeding think so, anyway."

The prospect of Uncle Jacob's elevation had already been canvassed in Broad Place by Charles, his nephew. There was evidently something in the wind Whitehall way. Uncle Jacob had professed such a heroic indifference to Aunt Priscilla's intelligent anticipations, that even Charles, his nephew, the simplest of simple souls, and a singularly unworldly young man, had been constrained to take an interest in the matter. As for Aunt Priscilla, she had been in such a state of flutter for the past two months, that the upper servants at Thole Park, Maidstone, even had visions of an earldom. Still, as Mr. Bryant, the butler, who in his distinguished youth had graduated at Bridport House, Mayfair, remarked to Mrs. Jennings the housekeeper in his statesmanlike way, "The Limit for baby's underclothing is a baronetcy."

II

Breakfast was just at an end when the trim parlor-maid came into the room with a portentous-looking milliner's box. It had that moment arrived, and on examination was found to contain a long coat of sable. This enchanting garment was with Mary's best wishes for future happiness.

The donor was scolded roundly for her lavishness, but Milly was delighted by the gift, and Mrs. Wren, who

had professed a stern determination to be no longer friends with Mary was rather touched. She well knew that she was a person "to bank on." Besides, Mrs. Wren had an honest admiration for a fine talent and the unassumingness with which it was worn. She was incapable of making an enemy, for her one idea was to bring pleasure to other people. If ever human creature had been designed for happiness it must have been this girl, yet none could have been more fully bent on casting it willfully away.

As a fact, both Milly and her mother had been much troubled by the course of recent events. The previous afternoon Jack had taken a sad farewell of his friends in Broad Place. His passage was already booked in the *Arcadia*, which that very Saturday was to sail from Liverpool to New York. All his hopes had proved futile, all his arguments vain. Mary could not be induced to change her mind, which even at the eleventh hour he had ventured to think was just possible. In those last desperate moments, strength of will had enabled her to stick to her resolve. And in the absence of any intimation from Bridport House the Tenderfoot had been driven to carry out his threat. Yet up till the very last he had tried his utmost to persuade the girl he loved to merge her own life in his and accompany him to that new world where a career awaited him.

Perhaps these efforts had not been wholly reasonable. She had a real vocation for the theater if ever girl had, even if he had a real vocation for jobbing land. But allowance has to be made for a strong man in love. He was in sorry case, poor fellow, but her sense of duty to

others was so strong, that even if it meant tragic unhappiness for both, as it surely must, she still sought the courage not to yield.

Such a decision was going to cost a very great deal. The previous afternoon, at the moment of parting, she had been fully aware of that, and hour by hour since she had realized it with a growing intensity. A stern effort of the will had been needed for Princess Bedalia to achieve her five hundred-and-sixty-second appearance that evening; she had spent a miserable night and now, in spite of the whole-heartedness with which she threw herself into Milly's affairs, her laugh was pitched a little too high.

Since the visit to Bridport House she had come to know her own mind quite definitely. She was deeply in love with Jack, but unless the powers that were gave consent, she was now resolved never to marry him. In vain her friends continued to assure her that such an attitude was wrong. In vain the Tenderfoot declared it to be simply preposterous. Cost what it might, it had become a point of honor not to yield. To one of such clear vision, with, as it seemed, a rather uncanny insight into the workings of worlds beyond her own, it was of vital importance to study the interests of Bridport House.

Milly, even if very angry with her friend, could not help admiring this devotion to a quixotic sense of right, and the force of character which faced the issue so unflinchingly. She could not begin to understand the point of view, but she well knew what it was going to cost. And this morning, in spite of the pleasant and piquant

drama of her own affairs, she could not rid herself of a feeling of distress on Mary's account. Now it had come "to footing the bill," a heavy price would have to be paid. And to Milly's shrewd, engagingly material mind, the whole situation was exasperating.

So much for the thoughts uppermost in a loyal heart, while the misguided cause of them danced a *pas seul* in honor of the morning's news. Milly, indeed, as she gazed in the glass over the chimney-piece to see what sort of a figure she made in the coat of sable, was much nearer tears than was either seemly or desirable. Still, in spite of that, she was able to muster a healthy curiosity upon the subject of her appearance. Fur has a trick of making common people look more common, and uncommon people look more uncommon, a trite fact of which Milly, the astute, was well aware. It was pleasant to find at any rate that a moment's fleeting survey set all her doubts at rest upon that important point. The coat, a dream of beauty, became her quite miraculously. What a virtue there was in that deep, rich gloss! It gave new values to the eyes, the hair, the rounded chin, even the piquant nose of the wearer.

"You're a dear!" Milly burst out, as she turned aside from the glass. But the person to whom the tribute was offered was quite absorbed in looking through the open window. Indeed, at that very moment a succession of royal toots from a motor horn ascended from the precincts of Broad Place, and Mary ran out on to the veranda with a view halloa. Then, her face full of humor and eloquence, she turned to look back into the room with the thrilling announcement: "Charley's here!"

III

In two minutes, or rather less as time is measured in Elysium, Mr. Charles Cheesewright had entered that pleasant room with all the gay assurance of an accepted suitor.

"How awfully well it reads, doesn't it?" he said, taking up the *Morning Post* with the fingers of a lover.

"Uncle Jacob's baronetcy?" said Mary, with an eye of bold mischief.

"Oh, no! That's a bit of a bore," said Mr. Charles with a polite grimace.

"Why a bore?"

"Uncle Jacob has no heir and he's trying to arrange for me to be the second bart."

Princess Bedalia looked with a royal air at her favorite. "The truth is, dear Charles, you are shamelessly pleased about the whole matter."

"Well, ye-es, I am." Charles was hopelessly cornered, but like any other self-respecting Briton he was quite determined to put as good a face as possible upon a most damaging admission. "I am so awfully pleased for Milly. And, of course, for Uncle Jacob."

"Not to mention Aunt Priscilla," interposed Milly. It was her proud boast that she had already tried a fall with Aunt Priscilla, had tried it, moreover, pretty successfully. That lady, within her own orbit, was a great light, but Miss Wren had proved very well able for her so far. The Aunt Priscillas of the world were not going to harry Miss Wren, and it was by no means clear that this simple fact did not count as much to her honor in

the sight of Uncle Jacob as it undoubtedly did in the sight of Charles, his nephew.

At any rate, Mr. Charles had come that morning to Broad Place on a diplomatic mission. It seemed that Uncle Jacob had made the sporting suggestion that the happy pair should motor down to Thole Park, Maidstone, for luncheon, that Charles, whose only merit in the sight of heaven was that he was "plus one" at North Berwick, should afterwards give careful consideration to the new nine-hole course which had been laid out in front of the house by the renowned Alec Thomson of Cupar, while Milly had a little heart-to-heart talk with Aunt Priscilla.

In a word, it began to look like being quite a good world for Charles and Milly. And even Mrs. Wren was constrained to admit it. Sheer human merit was becoming a little too much for the higher criticism. And daily these twain were discovering new beauties in each other. For one thing, Charles's upper lip was now as smooth as a baby's, and a mouth so firm and manly was thereby disclosed that it really seemed a pity to hide it. Moreover, for a fortnight past, in subtle, unsuspected ways he had been bursting forth into fine qualities. This morning, for instance, he seemed to have added a cubit to his stature. He was in the habit of saying in regard to himself that "he was not a flyer," but really if you saw him at the angle Milly did, and you came to think about him in her rational manner, it began to seem after all he might turn out a bit of one. If only he could be persuaded to give up his piano-tuner's hat there would be hope for him anyway.

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IV

Milly had scarcely left the room to put on her things before she was back in it. And she returned in such a state of excitement that she could hardly speak. The cause of it, moreover, following hard upon her heels, was a wholly unexpected visitor.

"He was just coming in at the front door," Milly explained, as soon as the state of her emotions would allow her to do so. "I was never so taken aback in my life. Why, a feather would have downed me."

In that moment of drama it was not too much to say that a feather would have had an equal effect upon Mary. If human resolve stood for anything, and it stood for a good deal in the case of Jack Dinneford, he should have been on his way to Liverpool. At six o'clock the previous evening they had parted heroically, not expecting to see each other again. For seventeen hours or so, they had been steeling their wills miserably. About 2 a.m., the hour when ghosts walk and pixies dance the foxtrot, both had felt that, after all, they would not be strong enough to bear the self-inflicted blow. But daylight had found them true to the faith that was in them. She had just enough fortitude not to telephone a change of mind, he was just man enough to decide not to miss the 10.5 from Euston.

Still, when the best has been said for it, the human will is but a trivial affair. Man is not much when the Fates begin to weave their magic web. A taxi was actually at the door of Jack's chambers, nay, his luggage had even been strapped into the front of the vehicle, when there came an urgent message by telephone from Brid-

port House to say that his Grace most particularly desired that Mr. Dinneford and Miss Lawrence would come to luncheon at half-past one.

What was a man to do? To obey the command was, of course, to forgo all hope of sailing by the *Arcadia*. To ignore it was to forgo all hope of entering Elysium. In justice to Mr. Dinneford it took him rather less than one minute to decide. His servant was promptly ordered to unship his gear and dismiss the taxi.

It was the nearest possible shave. His Grace had run matters so fine, that had he delayed his communication another two minutes, the Tenderfoot would have been on his way to New York. Some miraculous change of plan had occurred at the fifty-ninth minute of the eleventh hour. Exactly what it was must now be the business of a distracted lover to find out.

Jack's totally unexpected return to Broad Place was in itself an epic. And his unheralded appearance had such an effect upon Mary, upon Milly, upon Mrs. Wren, that he regretted not having had the forethought to telephone his change of plans. He came as a bolt from the blue, bringing with him an immensely difficult moment; and the presence of Mr. Charles Cheesewright, of whom Jack only knew by hearsay, undoubtedly added to its embarrassments.

Before anything could be done, even before the excited Milly could interpose a "Tell me, is it all right?" it was necessary for these paladins to be made known to each other. There was wariness on the part of both in the process. Neither was quite able to accept the other on trust. But a brief taking of the moral temperature by two members of the sex which inclines to reserve con-

vinced the one that Wrexham's successor had the air and the look of a good chap, and what was quite as important, convinced the other that the heir to the dukedom was not the least of a swankpot. All of which was so far excellent.

A desire to ask a thousand questions was simply burning holes in Milly. But she had to endure the torments of martyrdom. Questions could not be asked in the presence of Charles. It called for a great effort to behave as if the bottom had not fallen out of the universe. In the most heroic way she kept the conversation at a diplomatic level, remarking among other things that it was an ideal day for motoring, which finally reminded her that she must really go and put on her hat.

"And don't forget a thick veil," Mary called after her, in a voice of superhuman detachment.

The business of not letting the innocent Charles into the secret was a superb piece of comedy. There is really no need to write novels or to go to the play. They are the stuff our daily lives are made of. The way in which these four people set themselves to hoodwink a Simple Simon of a fifth was quite a rich bit of humor. Little recked Mr. Charles Cheesewright that the heavens had just opened in Broad Place.

At last Milly returned *cap-à-pie*, and then by the mercy of Divine Providence Mr. Charles suddenly remembered that it was a long way to Maidstone and that it was now a quarter past eleven.

"I'm quite ready when you are," said Milly to her cavalier, with all the guile of a young female serpent. Mr. Charles shook hands gravely and Britishly all round, and Mary wished them a pleasant journey, and Mrs.

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Wren "hoped they would wrap up well," and then Milly stepped deftly back three paces from the door, saying, "You know the way down, Charley," as clear an intimation as any young man could desire that it was up to him to lead it.

Charles led the way accordingly, and then came Milly's chance.

"What *has* happened?"

"Uncle Albert has sent for us."

"For both?"

"For both!"

Just for a moment Mary's feelings nearly proved too much for her. Having come to despair of Bridport House, there had been no reason to hope for this sudden change of front. She simply couldn't fathom it. That was also true of Milly. And as the significance of the whole thing rushed upon that imperious creature, she turned to Mary in the manner of Helen, the Spartan Queen. "A last word to you, Miss Lawrence!" Her voice trembled with excitement. "If you do anything idiotic, I'll never speak to you again. And that's official!"

V

As the crow flies, it is just nine minutes from Broad Place to Bridport House. Therefore they had time to burn. And as it was such a perfect day for motoring, it was a day equally well adapted for sitting under the trees in the Park.

Force majeure was applied so vigorously by Mrs. Wren, with timely aid from the Tenderfoot, that Mary was not given half a chance to jib at this new and amaz-

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ing turn of fortune's shuttle. She must wear her new hat with the roses—Mrs. Wren. She must wear Raquin's biscuit-colored masterpiece—Mr. Dinneford. Her diamond earrings thought Mrs. Wren. Mr. Dinneford thought her old-fashioned seed pearl. There was never really any question of her going to luncheon at Bridport House at 1.30. Her friends and counselors did not even allow it to arise. The only thing that need trouble her was how she looked when she got there.

En route she made a picture of immense distinction beyond a doubt. Whether it was the hat with the roses, or the sunshine of July, or the dress of simple muslin, which on second thoughts seemed more in keeping with the occasion than the Raquin masterpiece, and in the opinion of Mrs. Wren had the further merit "that it gave her eyes a chance," or her favorite earrings which Aunt Harriet had given her as a little girl; or the fact that Jack walked beside her, and that Happiness is still the greatest of Court painters, who shall say?—but in the course of a pilgrimage from Albert Gate to the Marble Arch and half way back again, she certainly attracted more than her share of the public notice. In fact, with her fine height and her lithe grace she actually provoked a hook-nosed, hard-featured dame in a sort of high-hung barouche to turn in the most deliberate manner and look at her. Or it may have been because the Tenderfoot in passing had raised a reluctant, semi-ironical hat.

"Aunt Charlotte," said he.

"I hope Aunt Charlotte is not as disagreeable as she looks," was Mary's thought, but doubtless remembering in the nick of time Talleyrand's famous maxim, she merely said, "What a *clever* face!"

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"Is it?" said Jack, unconcernedly. But his mind was on other things, perhaps.

As a matter of fact, it *was* on other things.

"Let's sit here five minutes," he said, as they came to a couple of vacant chairs. "Then I'll tell you a bit of news."

They sat accordingly. And the bit of news was the following:

"Muriel's hooked it."

Respect for her mother tongue caused Mary to demand a repetition of this cryptic statement.

"Hooked it with her Radical," Jack amplified. "They were married yesterday morning, quite quietly, 'owing to the indisposition of his Grace,' the papers say. And they are now in Scotland on their honeymoon."

"Let us hope they'll be happy," said Mary. "She has a very brilliant husband, at any rate."

"Not a doubt of that. If brains breed happiness, they'll be all right."

But do brains breed happiness? that was the question in their minds at the moment. Aunt Charlotte had brains undoubtedly, but as she passed them three minutes since no one could have said that she looked happy. The Duke had brains, but few would have said that he was happy. Mary herself had brains, and they had brought her within an ace of wrecking her one chance of real happiness.

They were in the midst of this philosophical inquiry, when Chance, that prince of magicians, gave the kaleidoscope a little loving shake, and hey! presto! the other side of the picture was laughingly presented to them.

A rather lop-sided young man in a brown bowler hat

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was marching head in air along the gravel in front of them. One shoulder was a little higher than its neighbor, his clothes looked shabby in the sun of July, his gait was slightly grotesque, yet upon his face was a smile of rare complacency. In one hand he held a small girl of five, and in the other a small boy to match her; and that may have been why at this precise moment he looked as if he had just acquired a controlling interest in the planet. And yet there must have been some deeper, subtler reason for this young man's air of power mingled with beatitude.

Rather mean of mansion as he was, it was impossible for two shrewd spectators of the human comedy on the Park chairs to ignore him as he swung gayly by. In spite of his impossible hat and his weird trousers, the mere look on his face was almost cosmic in its significance, he was so clearly on terms with heaven. But in any case he would have forcibly entered their scheme of existence. Just as he came level with them he chanced to lower his gaze abruptly and by doing so caught the fascinated eyes of Mary fixed upon his face.

"Good morning, Miss Lawrence. What a nice day!"

He was not in a position to take off his hat, but he enforced a hearty greeting with a superb bow, and passed jauntily on.

The Tenderfoot could not help being amused. "Who's your friend?" He turned a quizzical eye upon a countenance glowing with mischief.

"That's Alf."

"In the name of all that's wonderful, who is Alf?" The tone was expostulation all compact, but as mirth was

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frankly uppermost, even the most sensitive democrat could hardly have resented it.

"He's a man on a newspaper."

"I see," said the Tenderfoot. But somehow it didn't explain him.

"An old friend, my dear, and he's now the Press, with a capital letter. The other day he interviewed me for his paper."

"How could you let him?" gasped the Tenderfoot.

"For the sake of old times." Suddenly she loosed her famous note. "That little man is in my stars. He dates back to my earliest flapperdom, when my great ambition was to kill him. He was the green-grocer's boy in the next street, and he used to call after me:

"I am Mary Plantagenet;
Who would imagine it?
Eyes full of liquid fire,
Hair bright as jet;
No one knows my hist'ry,
I am wrapt in myst'ry,
I am the She-ro
Of a penny novelette."

"Well, I hope," said the Tenderfoot, "you jolly well lammed into him for such a piece of infernal cheek."

"Yes, I did," she confessed. "One day I turned on him and boxed his ears, and I'm bound to say he's been very respectful ever since. It was very amusing to be reminded of his existence when he turned up the other day. He paid me all sorts of extravagant compliments; he seems to hold himself responsible for any success I may have had."

"Nice of him."

"He says he has written me up for the past two years;

and that when he edits a paper of his own, and he's quite made up his mind that it won't be long before he does, I can have my portrait in it as often as I want."

"My Lord!"

"All very honestly meant," laughed Mary Plantagenet. "It is very charming of Alf—a *nom de guerre*, by the way. His real name is Michael Conner, but now he's Alf of the *Millennium*. And the other day at our interview, when he came to talk of old times, somehow I couldn't help loving him."

"What, love—*that*!"

"There's something to love in everybody, my dear. It's really very easy to like people if you hunt for the positive—if that's not a high brow way of putting it! The other day when Alf began to talk of his ambitions, and of the wife he had married, and of the little Alfs and the little Alfesses, I thought the more there are of you the merrier, because after all you are rather fine, you are good for the community, and you make this old world go round. Anyhow we began as enemies, and now we are friends 'for keeps,' and both Alf and I are so much the better for knowing it."

"I wonder!"

"Of course we are. And when Alf is a great editor, as he means to be, and he is able to carry out his great scheme of founding a Universal Love and Admiration Society, for the purpose of bringing out the best in everybody, including foreign nations—his very own idea, and to my mind a noble one—he has promised to make me an original member."

"A very original member!" The Tenderfoot scoffed. But sitting there in the eye of the morning, with the

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gentle leaves whispering over his head, and the finest girl in the land by his side drawing a fanciful picture of "Alf" on the gravel with the point of her sunshade, he was not in the mood for mockery. The world was so full of a number of things, that it seemed but right and decent to have these large and generous notions. Let every atom and molecule that made up the pageant of human experience overflow in love and admiration of its neighbor. He was a dud himself, his dwelling-place was *en parterre*, yet as heaven was above him and She was at his elbow, there was no denying that the little man who had just passed out of sight had laid hold somehow of a divine idea.

Yes, the ticket for the future was Universal Love and Admiration, at any rate for the heirs of the good God. Not a doubt that! He didn't pretend to be a philosopher, or a poet, but even he could see that yonder little scug in the brown pot hat was a big proposition.

"I wonder," he mused aloud, "how the little bounder came to think of *that*?"

"He says it came to him in his sleep." And the artist at his elbow gave one final masterful curl to the amazing trousers of the latest benefactor of the human species.

CHAPTER XIII

EVERYTHING FOR THE BEST

I

JACK glanced at the watch on his wrist. By the mercy of Allah there were fifty minutes yet. A whole fifty minutes yet to stay in heaven. And then . . .

Suddenly hard set by thoughts which had no right to be there he looked up and away in the direction of Bridport House.

"There they go!" He gave the pavement artist a little prod.

"Who—goes—where?"

"Cousin Blanche and Cousin Marjorie."

True enough! Sublimely unconscious of two pairs of amused eyes upon them, Cousin Blanche and Cousin Marjorie were passing slowly by. As usual at that hour they were riding their tall horses. And they became their tall horses so remarkably well that they might have belonged to the train of Artemis. In the saddle, at any rate, Cousin Blanche and Cousin Marjorie looked hard to beat.

"Now for your precious theory," said the Tenderfoot with malice. "Here's your chance to hunt for the positive."

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She fixed her eyes on the slowly-receding enemy. "Well, in the first place, my dear, those old-fashioned habits become them marvelously."

"No use for that sort of kit myself," growled the hostile critic.

"Then they are so much a part of their horses they might be female centaurs."

"And about as amusing as female centaurs."

"But we are hunting for the positive, aren't we? We are trying 'to affirm something,' as Alf would say. Now those two and their horses are far grander works of art than anything that ever came out of Greece or Italy. It has taken millions of years to produce them and they are so perfect in their way that one wonders how they ever came to be produced at all."

"You might say that of anything or anybody—if you come to think of it."

"Of course. I agree. And so would Alf. And that's why universal love and admiration are so proper and natural."

"Wait till you are really up against 'em and then you'll see."

"The more I'm up against them—if I am to be up against them—the more I shall love and admire them, not for what they are perhaps, but for what they might be if only they'd take a little trouble over their parts in this wonderful Play, which I'm quite sure the Author meant to be so very much finer than we silly amateurs ever give it a chance of becoming."

The sunshade began to scratch the gravel again, while Jack Dinneford sighed over its owner's crude philosophy.

Presently he began to realize again that they were in a fool's paradise. Surely they were taking a climb down too much for granted. Why should these hardshells give in so inexplicably? It was in the nature of things for a flaw to lurk under all this fair-seeming. Only fools would ever build on such a sublime pretense as Bridport House. Was it rational to expect its denizens to behave like ordinary sensible human people?

In order to sidetrack his fears he turned again to watch the labors of the pavement artist. The tip of a gifted sunshade was doing wonderful things with the gravel. It had just evolved a *chef d'œuvre*, which however was only apparent to the eye of faith.

"Who do you imagine that is?"

Imagination was certainly needed. It would not have been possible otherwise to see a resemblance to anything human.

"That is his lamp," hovered the sunshade above this masterpiece. "That is his truncheon. Those are his boots. That is his overcoat. And there we have his helmet. And there," the tip of the sunshade traced slowly, "the noble profile of the greatest dear in existence."

At that he was bound to own that had the Park gravel been more sensitive, here would have been a living portrait of Sergeant Kelly of the X Division. And even if it was only visible to the eye of faith it was pretext enough for honest laughter.

"No one knows her hist'ry,
She is wrapt in myst'ry,"

he quoted softly.

It was quite true. Various zephyrs and divers little birds had whispered the romantic fact in their ears long ago. But what did it matter? It was but one plume more in the cap of the Magician, a mere detail in that pageant of which Mystery itself is the last expression.

There may have been wisdom in their laughter. At any rate it seemed to give them a kind of Dutch courage for the ordeal that was now so near. But a rather forced gayety did not long continue; it was soon merged in a further piece of news which Jack suddenly remembered.

"By the way," he announced, "there's more trouble at Bridport House. My cousins, I hear, are going to live with Aunt Charlotte."

She was obliged to ask why, but he had to own that it was beyond his power to answer her question. All that he knew was that his cousins were "at serious outs" with their father, and that according to recent information they were on the point of leaving the paternal roof.

The Tenderfoot, however, in professing a diplomatic ignorance of a matter to which he had indiscreetly referred, had only pulled up in the nick of time. He knew rather more than he said. "There's a violent quarrel about Mrs. Sanderson," was at the tip of his tongue, but happily he saw in time that such words in such circumstances would be pure folly. Nay, it was folly to have drifted into these perilous waters at all; and in the face of a suddenly awakened curiosity, he proceeded at once to steer the talk into a safer channel.

After all, that was not very difficult. As they sat under the whispering leaves, gazing a little wistfully at the pomp of a summer's day, heaven was so near that it



"We mustn't build castles," she sighed, and the light
fringed her eyelids

hardly seemed rational to be giving a thought to those who dwelt in spheres less halcyon. The previous evening at six o'clock they had parted for ever in this very spot. But a swift turn of Fate's shuttle had changed everything.

As now they tried to understand what had occurred, it was hard to keep from building castles. An absurd old planet might prove, after all, such a wonderful place. When you are four-and-twenty and in love, and the crooked path suddenly turns to the straight, and the future is seen through magic vistas just ahead, surprising things are apt to arise, take shape, acquire a hue, a meaning. The light that never was on sea or land is quite likely to be found south of the Marble Arch and north of Hyde Park Corner. They were on the threshold of a very wonderful world. What gifts were theirs! Health, youth, a high-hearted joy in existence, here were the keys of heaven. Life was what they chose to make it.

Poetry herself clothed them as with a garment. But not for a moment must they forget, even amid the dangerous joys of a rather wild reaction, that all might be illusion. Voices whispered from the leaves that as yet they were not out of the wood. Jack, it is true, was fain to believe that the latest act of Bridport House implied a very real change of heart. For all that, as the hour of Fate drew on, he could not stifle a miserable feeling of nervousness. And Mary, too, in spite of a proud surface gayety, felt faint within. The dream was far too good to be true.

"Of *course* it's a climb down," said Jack, whistling to keep up his courage. "Do you suppose Uncle Albert

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would have sent for us like this unless he meant to chuck up the sponge?"

"We mustn't build castles," she sighed, and the light fringed her eyelids.

"We'll build 'em as high as the moon!"

She shook a whimsical head. And then the goad of youth drove her to a smile of perilous happiness. All sorts of subtle fears were lurking in that good, shrewd brain of hers. They were on the verge of chaos and Old Night—yet she had not the heart to rebuke him.

The dread hour of one-thirty was now so very near, that it was idle to disguise the fact that one at least of the two people on the Park chairs had grown extremely unhappy. Mary was quite sure that a horrible ordeal was going to prove too much for her. It was hardly less than madness to have yielded in the way she had. But qualms were useless, fears were vain. There was only one thing to do. She must set her teeth and go and face the music.

II

Punctual to the minute they were at the solemn portals of Bridport House. And then as a servant in a grotesque livery piloted them across an expanse of rather pretentious hall into a somber room, full of grandiose decoration and Victorian furniture, a grand fighting spirit suddenly rose in one whose need of it was sore. Mary was quaking in her shoes, yet the joy of battle came upon her in the queerest, most unexpected way. It was as if a magician had waved his wand and all the paltry emotions of the past hour were dispelled. Perhaps it was that deep down in her slept an Amazon. Or a clear con-

science may have inspired her; at any rate she had no need to reproach herself just then. She could look the whole world in the face. Her attitude had been sensitively correct; if other people did not appreciate that simple fact, so much the worse for other people!

A long five minutes they waited in that large and dismal room, a slight flush of anxiety upon their faces, their hearts beating a little wildly, no doubt. In all that time not a word passed between them; the tension was almost more than they could bear. If Fate had kept till the last one final scurvy trick it would be too horrible! And then suddenly, in the midst of this grim thought, an old man came hobbling painfully in. Both were struck at once by the look of him. There was something in the bearing, in the manner, in the play of the rather exquisite face which spoke to them intimately. For a reason deeply obscure, which Jack and Mary were very far from comprehending, the welcome he gave her was quite touching. It was full of a simple kindness, spontaneous, unstudied, oddly caressing.

Jack, amazed not a little by the heart-on-the-sleeve attitude of this old barbarian, could only ascribe it to the desire of a finished man of the world to put the best possible face on an impossible matter. Yet, somehow, that cynical view did not seem to cover the facts of the case.

In a way that hardly belonged to a tyrant and an autocrat, the old man took one of the girl's hands into the keeping of his poor enfeebled ones, and was still holding it when his sister and his eldest daughter came into the room. Both ladies were firm in the belief that this was the most disagreeable moment of their lives.

Still it was their nature to meet things heroically, and they now proceeded to do so.

The picture their minds had already formed of this girl was not a pleasing one. But as far as Lady Wargrave was concerned it was shattered almost instantly. The likeness between father and daughter was amazing. She had, in quite a remarkable degree, the look of noblesse the world had always admired in him, with which, however, he had signally failed to endow the daughters of the first marriage. But there was far more than a superficial likeness to shatter preconceived ideas. Another, more virile strain was hers. The mettle of the pasture, the breath of the moorland, had given her a look of purpose and fire, even if the grace of the salon had yielded much of its own peculiar amenity. Whatever else she might be, the youngest daughter of the House of Dinneford was a personality of a rare but vivid kind.

As soon as the Duke realized that the ladies had entered the room, he gravely presented the girl, but with a touch of chivalry that she simply adored in him. The little note of homage melted in the oddest way the half-fierce constraint with which she turned instinctively to meet these enemies. Sarah bowed rather coldly, but Aunt Charlotte came forward at once with a proffered hand.

"My sister," murmured his Grace. In his eyes was a certain humor and perhaps a spice of malice.

For a moment speech was impossible. The girl looked slowly from one to the other, and then suddenly it came upon her that these people were old and hard hit. She felt a curious revulsion of feeling. Their surrender was

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unconditional, and woman's sixth sense told her what their thoughts must be. They must be suffering horribly. All at once the fight went out of her.

In a fashion rather odd, with almost the naïveté of a child, she turned aside in a deadly fight with tears, that she managed to screw back into her eyes.

It was left to Lady Wargrave to break a silence which threatened to become bitterly embarrassing: "Come over here and talk to me," she said with a directness the girl was quick to obey.

Lady Wargrave led the way to a couple of empty chairs near a window, Mary following with a kind sick timidity she had never felt before, and a heart that beat convulsively. What could the old dragon have to say to her? Even now she half expected a talon.

The Dowager pointed to a chair, sat down grimly, and then said abruptly, "I hope you will be happy."

There was something in the words that threw the girl into momentary confusion. The fact was a miracle had occurred and her bewilderment was seeking a reason for it. Only one explanation came to her, and it was that these great powers, rather than suffer Jack to depart, were ready to make the best of his fiancée. There was not much comfort in the theory, but no other was feasible. Place and power, it seemed, were caught in meshes of their own weaving. And yet bruised in pride as she was by a situation for which she was not to blame, the rather splendid bearing of these old hard-bitten warriors touched a chivalry far down. Deep called unto deep. At the unexpected words of the griffin, she had again to screw the tears back into her eyes. And then she said in a voice that seemed to be stifling her, "It's

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not my fault. I didn't know . . . I didn't want this . . . If you will . . . If you will help me I will do my best . . . not . . . to . . ."

The eyes of the Dowager searched her right through.

"No, you are not to blame," she said judicially. "We are all going to help you," and then in a voice which cracked in the middle she added, to her own surprise, "my dear."

III

At luncheon the girl had the place of honor at the right hand of his Grace. It was a rather chastened assembly. The arrival of the cuckoo in the nest was a fitting climax to Muriel. Both episodes were felt to be buffets of a wholly undeservedly severity; they might even be said to have shaken a sublime edifice to its base. Not for a moment had the collective wisdom of the Dinneford ladies connived at Muriel's Breadth, nor had it in any way countenanced the absurd fellow Jack in his infatuation for a chorus girl.

Simple justice, however, compelled these stern critics to own that Bridport's future duchess had come as a rather agreeable surprise. She differed so much from the person they had expected. They couldn't deny that she was a personality. Moreover, there was a force, a distinction that might hope to mold and even harmonize with her place in the table of precedence. So good were her manners that the subtle air of the great world might one day be hers.

It amazed them to see the effect she had already had on their fastidious and difficult parent. He was talking to her of men and events and times past in a way he

had not talked for years. He discoursed of the great ones of his youth, the singers and dancers of the 'Sixties when he was at the Embassy at Paris and ginger was hot in the mouth. Then by a process of gradation he went on to tell his old stories of Gladstone and Dizzy, to discuss books and politics and the pictures in the Uffizi, and to cap with tales of his own travels an occasional brief anecdote, wittily told, of her own tours in America and South Africa.

Sarah, Blanche, and Marjorie could not help feeling hostile, yet it was clear that this remarkable girl had put an enchantment on their father. While he talked to her the table, the room, the people in it seemed to pass beyond his ken. Candor bred the thought that it was not to be wondered at, her way of listening was so delightful. The beautiful head—it hurt them to admit the fact yet there it was—bent towards him in a kind of loving reverence, changing each phrase of his into something rare and memorable by a receptivity whose only wish was to give pleasure to a poor old man struggling with a basin of arrowroot—that sight and the sense of a presence alive in every nerve, a voice of pure music, and a face incapable of evil: was it surprising that a spell was cast upon their sire? Take her as one would she was a real natural force—an original upon whom the fairies had lavished many gifts.

The family chieftain was renewing his youth, but only Charlotte understood why. In common with the rest of the world, Sarah, Blanche, and Marjorie were to be kept in ignorance of the truth—for the present at any rate. But already the Dinneford ladies had taken further counsel of the sage of Hill Street, and upon her advice all

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thought of secession from Bridport House had been given up. Reflection had convinced Lady Wargrave, now in possession of the light, that the true interests of the Family would be served by silence and submission. After all, Mrs. Sanderson was an old and valued retainer; her integrity was beyond question; her devotion and single-minded regard for their father's welfare ought not to be forgotten!

Taking all the circumstances into account, it was in Aunt Charlotte's opinion, a case for humble pie. And to do the ladies no injustice they were ready to consume it gracefully. Jack, after all, was quite a distant connection; and what was even more important in their sight, the girl herself was presentable. Their father, at any rate, made no secret of the fact that he found her sympathetic. Nay, he was even a little carried away by her. As the meal went on, his manner towards her almost verged upon affection; and at the end, in open defiance of his doctors, he went to the length of wishing her happiness in a glass of famous Madeira.

IV

At five minutes past three Mary and Jack awoke with a start from a dream fantasy, to find themselves breathing the ampler air of Park Lane. Even then they could not quite grasp the meaning of all that had happened. Unconditional surrender indeed, yet so sudden, so causeless, so mysterious. Why had this strange thing come to be?

But just now they were not in a mood to question the inscrutable wisdom of the good God. Behind the curtain of appearances the sun shone more bravely than

ever, the dust of July lay a shade lighter on the trees across the road. No, there was really no need for Providence to give an account of itself at that moment; the nature of things called for no analysis.

"I've fallen in love with that old man."

Even if Jack heard the words he was not in a position to offer comment upon them, for he was in the act of summoning a taxi from the lee of the Park railings.

"Where shall we go?"

"To the moon and back again?"

"And why not! It is not very far to the moon if you get hold of the right kind of vehicle. But MX 54,906 proved on inspection hardly to be adapted for the purpose; at any rate Jack came to the conclusion after a mere glance at the tires that Hampton Court, via Richmond and Elysium, would meet the case equally well.

V

Meanwhile his Grace in his favorite chair in his favorite room, was doing his best to envisage "The Outlook for Democracy," with the aid of the *Quarterly Review*. Of a sudden the clock on the chimneypiece chimed a quarter past three, and he laid down an article perfect alike in form, taste and scholarship, with the air of one who expects something to happen.

Something did happen. In almost the same moment, the housekeeper, Mrs. Sanderson, came into the room. She carried a tray containing a glass, a spoon, and a bottle.

His Grace shook his head. "I've had a glass of Madeira."

"How could you be so unwise!" It was the gentle,

half-smiling tone of a mother who reproves a very dear but willful child.

She measured the draught inflexibly and he drank it like a man. As he returned the glass to the tray he sighed a little, and then with a whimsical glance upwards he said slowly and softly, "She has her mother's brains."

As she looked down upon him, he saw the color darkening a strong and beautiful face. "And her father's eyes." The warmth of her voice almost stifled the words.

For nearly a minute there was so deep a silence that even the clock on the chimneypiece was lost in it. And then very slowly and gently, as one who thinks aloud, he said, "I am trying to remember those words of Milton." He closed his eyes with a smile of perplexity. "Ah, yes, yes. I have them now:

"'He for God only, she for God in him.'"

